

THE BEST LIST 2008

LIL WAYNE, AMY WINEHOUSE'S HAIR & 30 MORE EXEMPLARS OF EXCELLENCE

BLENDER

SPECIAL
REPORT

Britney Spears
Has Lost Her Kids,
Her Fans,
Her Underwear ...
and Her Mind

**HOW
WILL IT
END?**

PARAMORE
"CHICKS DON'T
HAVE TO BE
TILA TEQUILA"

UP TILL
SUNRISE WITH
**LENNY
KRAVITZ**

MEET THE
(MIDDLE-SCHOOL)
BEATLES!
**JONAS
BROTHERS**

PLUS

CAT POWER
**NATASHA
BEDINGFIELD**
LED ZEPPELIN

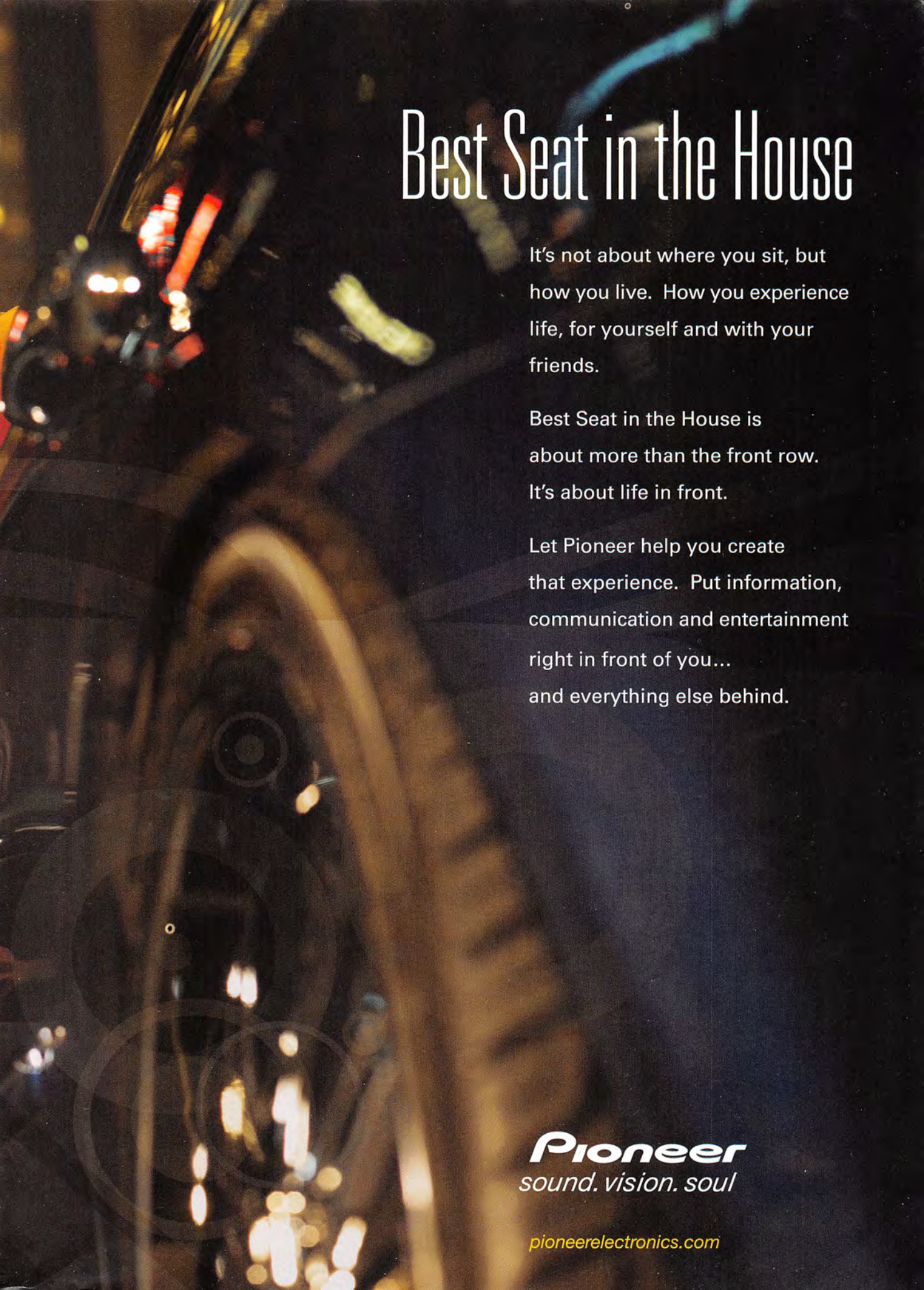
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COMPOSITE PHOTO. BRITNEY
DID NOT POSE FOR
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NOT HER BODY.

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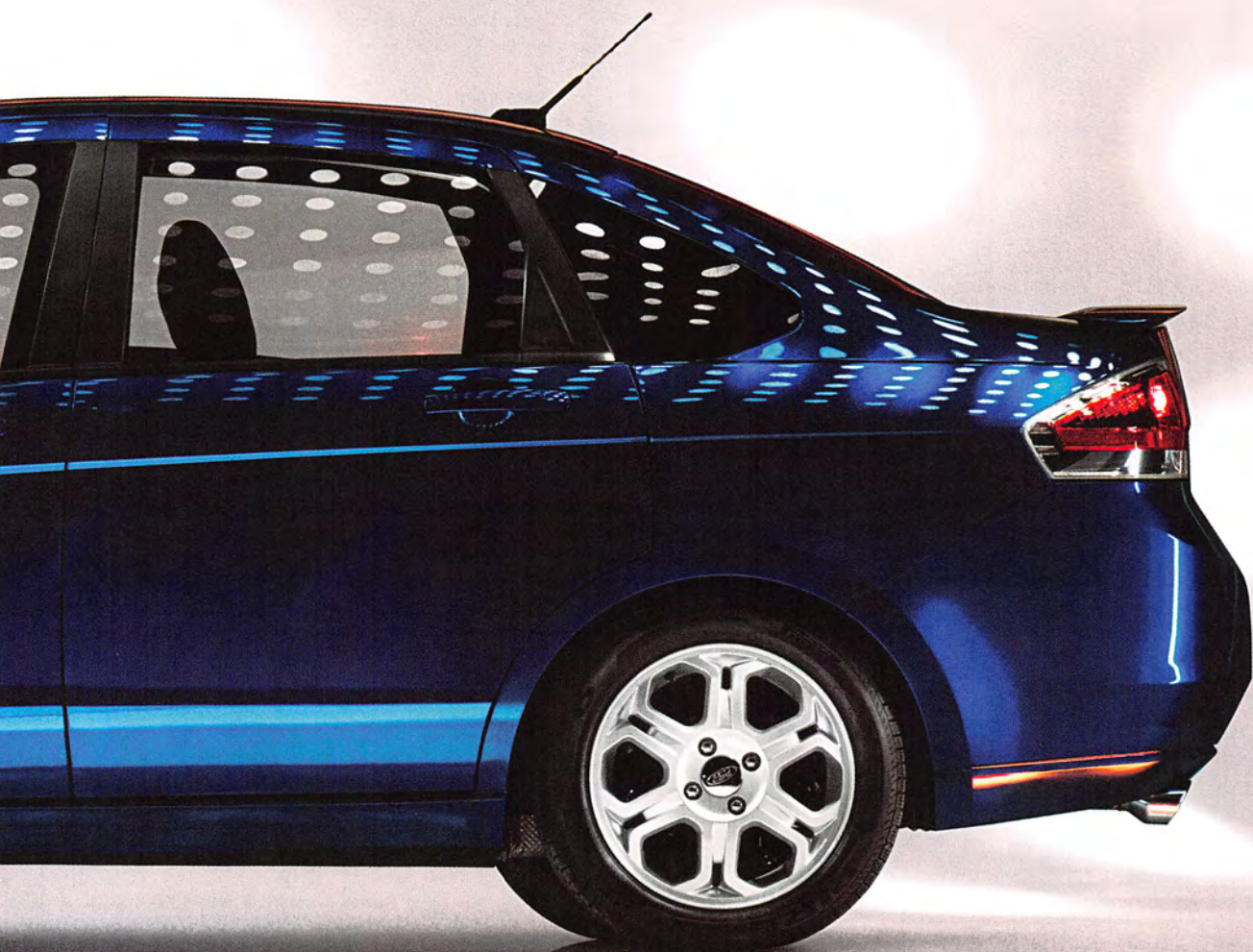
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THE Blender Bible

INSTANT POP OMNISCIENCE, IN HANDY FOLD-OUT FORM

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Sorry, Raveonettes, only one of you got the modeling job.

1. THE RAVEONETTES
"ALY, WALK WITH ME"

VICE
Two minutes of ghostly duetting and biker-gang groove—followed by three minutes of badass, reverb-annihilated guitar squall.

2. TRINA FEAT. KILLER MIKE
"LOOK BACK AT ME"

[ONLINE]
A captivatingly weird ode to doggy-style lovin'.

3. OUTKAST
"DA ART OF STORYTELLIN' PART 4"

GRAND HUSTLE/ATLANTIC
More André and Big Boi hotness or another frustrating 'Kast-reunion tease? Answer: Both!

4. THE KILLS
"U.R.A. FEVER"

DOMINO
Rejected titles: "U.R.D. Sniffles," "U.R.A. Head Cold" and "U.R. Ebola."

5. THE DREAM
"FAST CAR"

DEF JAM
From R&B's plump playa, a shameless—and irresistible—Prince rip. Purple-wearing shawty is da shit!

6. YUNG RALPH
"LOOK LIKE MONEY"

UNIVERSAL REPUBLIC
This Dirty South upstart resembles money, smells like money and walks

like money. Little-known fact: He also tastes, exercises, washes dishes and vacuums like money.

7. NADA SURF
"SEE THESE BONES"

BARSUK
Wistful, *West Side Story*-referencing guitar pop from Brooklyn indie bards.

8. BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
"GIRLS IN THEIR SUMMER CLOTHES"

COLUMBIA
It's winter in New Jersey, but the Boss helps keep warm with visions of spaghetti straps and short-shorts.

9. NATASHA BEDINGFIELD
FEAT. SEAN KINGSTON
"LOVE LIKE THIS"

EPIC
A strange, fizzy team-up that sails past cheesy and winds up back at totally sweet.

10. GRAND ARCHIVES
"SLEEPDRIVING"

SUB POP
The ex-Band of Horses guitarist unveils his new band. Thankfully, it sounds a lot like his old band.

11. WU-TANG CLAN
"CAMPFIRE"

SRC/UNIVERSAL MOTOWN
More proof of the Wu's sinister brilliance: They make s'mores, bug spray and "Kumbaya" sound gangsta.

12. ROBYN
"BE MINE"

CHERRYTREE/INTERSCOPE
The comeback single from this Europop fox is finally getting a U.S. release, although Sweden's had it for years. Real cool, Sweden!

13. JACK PEÑATE
"HAVE I BEEN A FOOL"

XL
A fey East Londoner says he's sorry with sugary ska-pop.

14. JASON COLLETT
"OUT OF TIME"

ARTS & CRAFTS
A *whoo-oo-h-oo-h-ing* guitar jam from the sometime Broken Social Scenester.

15. THE WHITE STRIPES
"IT'S MY FAULT FOR BEING FAMOUS"

THIRD MAN/WARNER BROS.
Paparazzi-baiting jerkery! Fake Southern accents! Guest vocals from Beck! Just your typical White Stripes B-side.

16. BLAQSTARR FEAT. RYE RYE
"SHAKE IT TO THE GROUND"

MAD DECENT
This M.I.A.-approved Baltimore tween pumps out an unstoppably dinky dance instructional.

17. STEPHEN MALKMUS
"REAL EMOTIONAL TRASH"

MATADOR
More kooky beauty from the Pavement mainman.

18. ASHLEE SIMPSON
"OUTTA MY HEAD"

GEFFEN
Some hummable WTF?-pop from Ashlee.

19. TYGA
"WOWW"

[ONLINE]
Lil Wayne loves him. Fall Out Boy love him. Emo-rap, holler!

20. HOLY GHOST!
"HOLD ON"

DFA
Disco sleaze from two '80s babies.

WATCH THESE

YOUTUBE ANDY KAUFMAN, "I TRUSTED YOU"

Throwback! In this recently unearthed clip from a 1977 episode of late-night TV show *The Midnight Special*, comedian, provocateur, wrestler and Elvis impersonator Andy Kaufman turns three little words into one hilariously repetitive hoedown.

TV FLAVOR OF LOVE 3

Our favorite oversize-clock-wearing, Viking-helmeted loverman is on the hunt once more for a soul mate in a house inhabited by 20 open-minded women. For Flav's sake, we hope the third time's the charm. Premieres February 11 on VH1.

MOVIE SEMI-PRO

Will Ferrell does something completely unexpected: a sports comedy. Set in '76, *Semi-Pro* revolves around Jackie Moon, an Afro'd singer turned basketball-team owner/player/coach. Woody Harrelson and André 3000 get in on the short-short-clad action. In theaters February 29.



PLAY THESE

BURNOUT PARADISE

EA: XBOX 360, PS3

Burnout Paradise has nothing to do with the 7-Eleven parking lot—it's actually a beautifully rendered street-racing game. Compete in a variety of automotive challenges or just cruise around looking for other speed freaks to blow away.

SUPER SMASH BROS BRAWL

NINTENDO: Wii

Mario, Luigi and a few non-Nintendo guest stars from across the street, including Sonic the Hedgehog, duke it out in a cartoonish fighting game that's more *Circus of the Stars* than *Mortal Kombat*.



SEE THESE

VAMPIRE WEEKEND

These Afropop-lovin' preps take their breezy concoctions on the road. Catch them in L.A. (3/20), Portland, Oregon (3/25) and Seattle (3/26).

BON JOVI/DAUGHTRY

Stadium gods young and old unite on this workin'-class-rock megabill. Check 'em in Vegas (4/12) and Des Moines, Iowa (4/20).



SPIN THESE

1 THE COOL KIDS THE BAKE SALE

CHOCOLATE INDUSTRIES

Nerd-hop alert! These BMX-loving MCs serve up a fantastically spare EP. Bring your dookie ropes.

2 VARIOUS ARTISTS BEYOND HAMSTERDAM

NONESUCH

As heard on *The Wire*, Baltimore rap at its grimmest. Crushing bleak social commentary not included.

3 HOT CHIP MADE IN THE DARK

ASTRALWERKS/DFA

Metal-inspired synths meet a gentle croon on this U.K. dance squad's third LP.

4 MARVIN GAYE HERE, MY DEAR

HIP-OSELECT

An overlooked soul masterpiece, wrought in relationship hell.





Happy hour.

FEATURES

56) BRITNEY SPEARS

Just when you think it can't get any worse, you refresh PerezHilton.com and it does. The inside story on how Britney went off the rails—and how friends think she can avoid the ultimate meltdown.

66) Q&A: NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

She may be a good girl, but the soulful singer insists she's a great pole dancer who could whup Amy Winehouse in a fight.

69) THE BEST LIST 2008

We've traveled the globe—from Lil Wayne's recording studio in Atlanta to a government research outpost in Antarctica—to bring you the finest in music, tech, fashion and talking dolls.

70) BEST ROCK STAR ALIVE: LIL WAYNE

The simile-spewing, cough-syrup-swilling, incredibly prolific rapper is crazy good. Extra emphasis on the *crazy*.

78) BEST RAP BOOMLET: HIPSTER HOP

The Cool Kids, Kid Sister and Santogold rhyme about BMX bikes and pedicures. Meet hip-hop's shiny, happy "ghetto nerds."

80) BEST HEAVY-METAL DRUMMER

It's *Blender's* version of March Madness: 32 skinsmen battle it out for the title of metal's mightiest thumper.

90) BEST MUSIC FESTIVAL: ICESTOCK

The coldest, most desolate place on the planet is home to the best-kept secret in rock festivals.

"YOU PLAY WITH ME, I'LL
KNOCK YOUR HEAD OPEN!"
70



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Paramore's Hayley Williams raids Pete Wentz's makeup bag.

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The onetime hard-partying Beatle talks about his storied career—the decades he can remember, at least.
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PARAMORE
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- 52) THE GREATEST SONGS EVER:
"BORDERLINE"
Madonna hated this hit, but it made her a global star.

- 54) ASK BLENDER
Blondie's Debbie Harry: kidnapped by a serial killer?
- 120) WHO DOES LENNY KRAVITZ THINK HE IS?
The '60s-loving rocker may have retired his bong, but he still abides by the principle "let love rule."



On the cover
BRITNEY SPEARS
Photo-illustration by
R. MUTT STUDIOS
Prop styling: Erinn Valencich.

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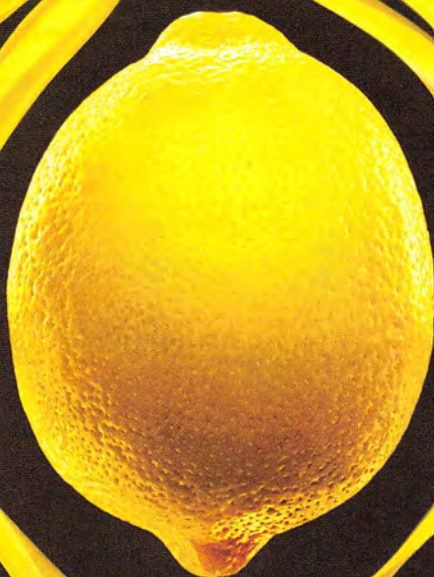
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11 times per year by Dennis Publishing, Inc., 1040 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10018.
Tel (212) 302-2626; Fax (212) 302-2635; blender.com

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BECAUSE SHARING IS CARING ...

Fergie's PSA for Testicular Cancer Awareness Month proved very effective.

Year of the Fox

I can't think of anyone who deserves your Woman of the Year honor more than the sexy, talented and hard-working Fergie ("Woman of the Year," January/February). But, *Blender*, must you constantly dwell on the facts that Fergie was a meth addict and once wet her pants onstage? Come on! She's moved way past those things already.

Christine Green, Sebring, FL

Interesting letter, but did you know that Fergie is a former meth addict who once pissed herself onstage?

Year of the Dog

How could you select someone who performs tripe like "My Humps" and "London Bridge" as your Woman of the Year? Why not someone more talented, like Lily Allen, Jenny Lewis or even Amy Winehouse? I haven't seen a pick quite so lame since *Time* named "you" as its Person of the Year.

B.J. Carlson, Mesa, AZ

Metal Shortage

Your "25 Best Albums of 2007" (January/February) had pretty much every kind of popular music there is, but there was one genre that was

shockingly not represented at all: heavy metal. I'm tired of snooty critics who snub metal! Last year, Atreyu, Shadows Fall, Children of Bodom and 3 Inches of Blood—to name just a few—released albums that kicked the asses of pretty much every record on your list.

Swordmaster666, Canton, OH

Failure of Diplo-macy

It's obvious that M.I.A. ("The 25 Best Albums of 2007") and her ex, the producer Diplo, had a bitter breakup, but I don't get why she's mad at him for not saying "a word or two in the press" to help her with her immigration problem. I doubt the INS would give a shit about the opinions of a relatively obscure producer.

James Lemanski, Austin, TX

Respect! at the Disco

I'm not a big fan of Panic! at the Disco's wordy brand of emo, but I gained new respect for the band after reading your "In the Studio" story on them ("Timeless," January/February). Panic's Ryan Ross proved to be a really good sport about being named to your list of "The 40 Worst Lyricists in Rock" (November). I'm sure your No. 1 pick—that sissy, Sting—wouldn't be quite so gracious.

Born2run, Waterloo, LA

The Feist Track to Success

Thanks for your excellent feature on Feist ("Breakthrough of the Year," January/February). I've been in love with Feist ever since I saw her performing as electro-smut star Peaches's sidekick, under the name Bitch Lap Lap. I still find it hard to believe that today she's a huge star whose music appears on *Grey's Anatomy*.

Kyle Henner, Winnipeg, Canada

On top of that, we understand that one of her songs is associated with a little-known brand of digital-music player.

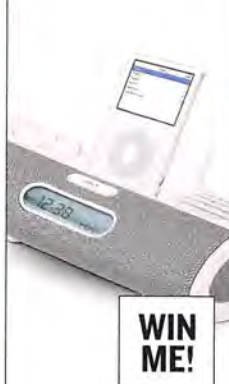
"Umbrella" Coverage

I enjoyed your piece on the making of Rihanna's "Umbrella" ("Song of the Year," January/February). I love her version, but I can't help but wonder what it would have sounded like as performed by Mary J. Blige or Britney Spears, the two people the song was offered to before Rihanna. I bet Mary J. would have nailed it, and Britney would have turned it to shit, just like everything else she touches.

Storm_king, Florence, SC >>

IF POP STARS WERE DOGS ...

Send us a photo and tell us which music celebrity your pooch resembles. If we print it, you'll win the Coby clock radio with iPod sound system.



NEVER HIDE



CREW



GENUINE SINCE 1937

'Tine Spirit

WTF is wrong with your writers? They list Arctic Monkeys, Art Brut, the Strokes, Green Day (!?) and Pavement (*twice*) on "The 100 Greatest Indie-Rock Albums Ever" (December). But there's no mention of the Libertines' *Up the Bracket*, which *Blender* once gave five stars to! Are you for real?

Morpiator, DuBois, PA

Nerds on an Indie-Rock List? Never!

After I finished "The 100 Greatest Indie-Rock Albums Ever," I feverishly flipped through the pages trying to find where you hid Weezer's blue album or *Pinkerton*. How is it that not one of the Weezer's indie masterpieces made it onto your list? Say it ain't so, *Blender*!

Tim Curtin, Tallahassee, FL

If we said it ain't so, we'd be lying. And, according to our crack team of copy editors, grammatically incorrect.

So You Think Rove Can Dance

I'm upset that Karl Rove's the MC Rove came in second to Soulja Boy's the Crank That (Soulja Boy) in your "Novelty Dance of the Year" Readers' Poll category (January/February). What could be more entertaining than a 57-year-old doughy white man trying to act hip?

Terminator3000, Seattle

Then you're really going to love General David Petraeus's the Surge That (Soulja Man) routine.

Cassie, Oh!

I'm not looking forward to hearing Cassie's upcoming album, but based on the smokin'-hot pictures of her you ran ("2008 Rock & Roll User's Guide," January/February), I am looking forward to seeing her new music videos.

Grinder1077, Baton Rouge, LA

Superhead

People may call Tila Tequila "a talentless whore-slut," as she admits to you ("Who Does Tila Tequila Think She Is?" January/February), but she really is quite talented. It's gotta take a lot of skill to balance that huge noggin of hers on her tiny little body!

Foodfight33, Waterville, ME

Yada, Yada, Yada

As a rabid *Seinfeld* fan, I really appreciated the "Love the Drake" headline on your Nick Drake box-set review ("Reissues," January/February). The episode where that quote comes from, "The Handicap Spot" (season 4), is one of my absolute favorites!

Nathan Goode, Atlanta

If a certain Detroit alt-rock band ever puts out a decent album, we've got our headline ready: "Sponge: Worthy!"

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Blender readers: We want to hear from you! So write in and tell us how you really feel.

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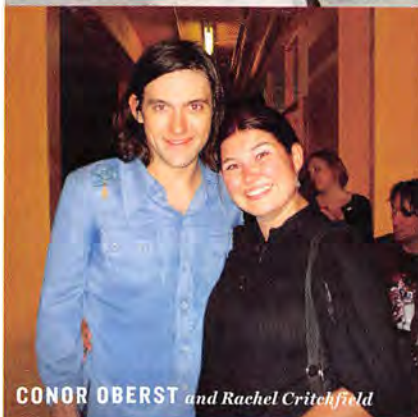
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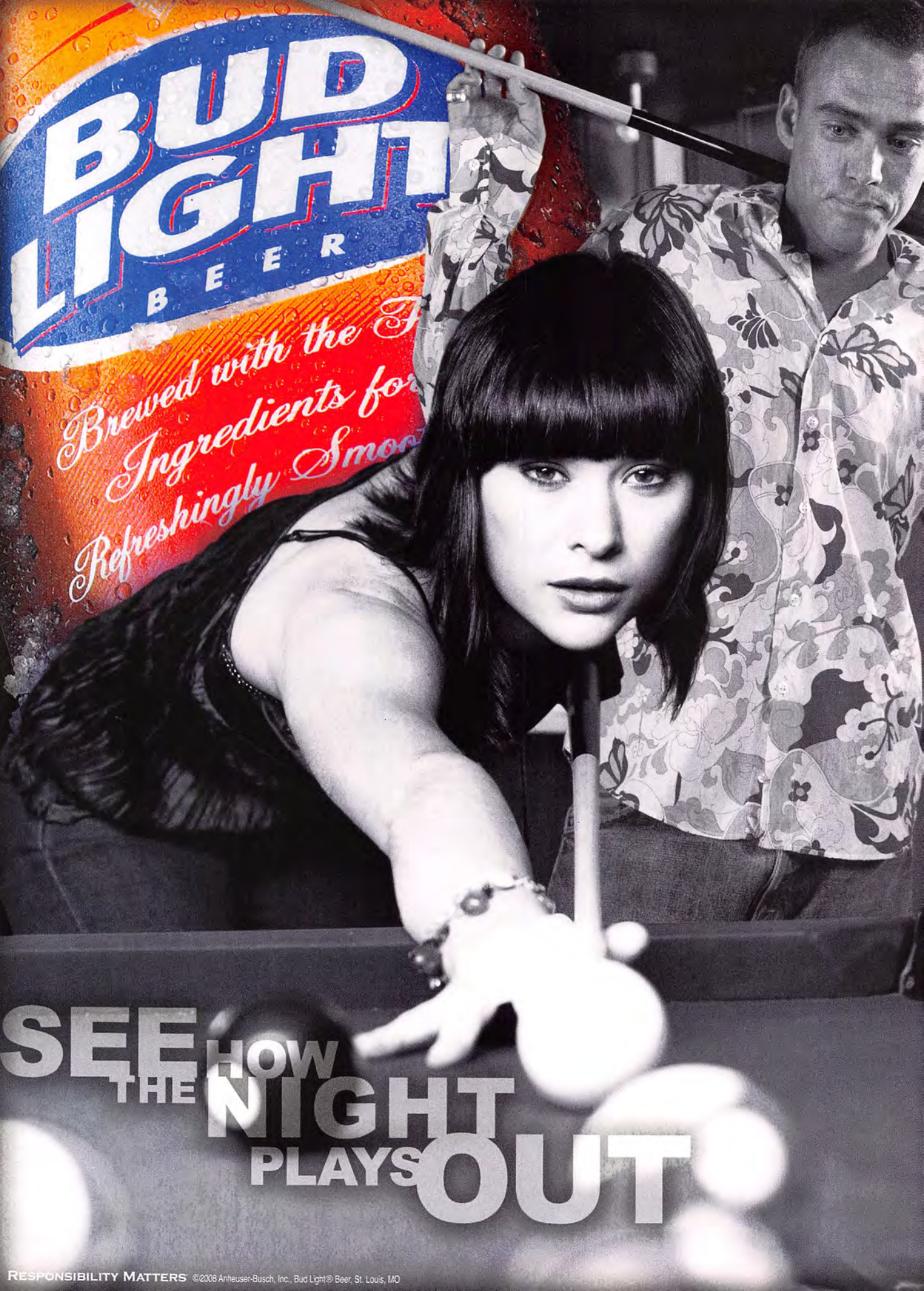
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SEE HOW THE NIGHT PLAYS OUT

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BREAKING NEWS AND JUICY RUMORS



Just another quiet night at the R. Kelly estate.



The WIZZard

R. Kelly returns to Chicago for a triumphant live show—and his case's 108th court date

"SOME OF Y'ALL wanna fuck!" R. Kelly shouted during the December 21 Chicago stop on his *Double Up* tour, his first performance in his hometown since April 2006. "Y'all heard your boy was comin' to the Chi and y'all got a new outfit, a \$600 wig."

Kelly opened the show with a boxer's fanfare. Like a prizefighter with a grudge to settle, he emerged from his dressing room in a sequined robe. Stalking his way to the stage, which was decked out like a boxing ring, with round-card girls and a boxing announcer, he lit into "The Champ," his defiant *Double Up* opener: "I'm opposite of the demon that faces me/I've been through hell/Lived in the belly of the beast." By the end of the show, the 40-year-old singer had traded his thug pretensions for high-art aspirations and an homage to his South Side roots. Looking somewhat like Flavor Flav, in baggy white tails, Kelly conducted Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, then led a *Good Times* sing-along.

Kelly's next homecoming is May 9, when his long-awaited trial begins—in 2002 he was charged for allegedly videotaping himself having sexual relations with an apparently underage girl. But no matter what happens in court, Kelly still gets love onstage. Tens of thousands of fans screeched at every lascivious tongue flick and suggestive lyric. One \$100-ticket holder said she doubts Kelly is actually on the tape ("you can alter any image") and even if he is, the teen is just as much to blame. "If you present yourself like a 25-year-old—or a ho," said Tiffany Owens, 27, "you'll be treated like one."

If it weren't for a forgiving Chicago judge, Kelly would have sat out the show in jail. Three days before, Kelly's tour bus was stopped for speeding in Utah, and since the "I Believe I Can Fly" singer is afraid to fly, the travel delay caused him to miss a pre-trial hearing (the 108th court date so far). "Next time," he promised the court, "I will get on a plane." *Ted McClelland*



Acrassicauda: "Hey, how do we pronounce our name again?"

METAL EASTERNERS

ACRASSICAUDA—Iraq's only metal band—suffer studio bombing, exile



When *Blender* first met Acrassicauda, Iraq's only heavy-metal band ("I-Rawkl" December 2004), the

group had nowhere to play—having been blacklisted from Baghdad venues for allegedly inciting head-banging and slam-dancing. Even worse, they'd been receiving death threats from Islamist extremists accusing them of Satanism. Today, things haven't improved much: The band has been forced into exile.

In August 2006, a month after their Baghdad practice space was bombed, Acrassicauda (Latin for black scorpion) fled to Damascus, Syria, and lived as refugees for a year. Thanks to money raised on the band's behalf, the noisy foursome then relocated to Turkey. As of press time, they were practicing and awaiting word as to whether they'd be allowed to stay there.

"Playing metal during the Saddam era and the ultra-violent years that followed is either the bravest or stupidest path a group of young Iraqi musicians could opt for, but it was the only way they could truly escape their hellish reality," says Vice Films cofounder Suroosh Alvi, who co-directed *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*, a documentary about the band that will be released theatrically in early May. Acrassicauda bassist Firas Awlateef, 26, echoes that sentiment: "Some people do drugs to escape. We do headbanging. As long as we make songs, we're alive. Otherwise, we're just like dead people."

Awlateef doesn't know how the film's release will affect the band's situation. But he says Acrassicauda hold onto their dreams of someday playing Ozzfest and ultimately returning to their home "to make a huge heavy-metal festival, like the Iraqi Woodstock." Mark Yarm

NEWS ROUNDUP

Casey Calvert of Hawthorne Heights died from an accidental overdose of various opiates and antidepressants. The guitarist was found dead on the band's tour bus. Calvert's widow said he suffered from depression; his bandmates added he was not a recreational drug user.

Six troopers and three police dogs showed up at a Connecticut school after a teacher mistook a custodian singing *Guns N' Roses'* "Welcome to the Jungle" over the loudspeaker for a threat. The teacher was working after hours when she heard a voice say that she was going to die, causing her to barricade herself in a room. Police found that three teenagers, one of them a custodian, had been playing with the PA system.

"Hi, I'd like to return my copy of *Time Life's Do-It-Yourself Face Repair*."



FACE-LACKO JACKO

MICHAEL JACKSON debuts new mummy look

IN DECEMBER, MICHAEL JACKSON unveiled his latest disguise while shopping at a Las Vegas bookstore. Clasp a pair of reading glasses and a book about fire-breathing dragons, Jackson, 49, seemed to have a number of bandages haphazardly pasted around his mouth and nose. After three hours, the King of Pop left with his three children (Prince Michael, 10; Paris Katherine, 9; Prince Michael II—a.k.a. Blanket—5) and bags filled with books and magazines. Tabloids reported that Blanket had accidentally hit the singer in the face, causing his upper lip to collapse. Noel Boddie

WORD!



"I WON'T GET A CHANCE TO SEE THE WORLD, UNLESS I GO EVERYWHERE."

50 Cent

BRAVISSIMA!

LINDSAY LOHAN bags three dudes, goes off the wagon in Italy

Lindsay Lohan has been keeping busy. The same week an ex-boyfriend called her a "nymphomaniac" and an AOL Moviephone poll said her turn in *I Know Who Killed Me* was the worst performance of 2007, Lohan spent romantic time with three men in 24 hours and was given an award for her "contribution to cinema." In Italy to receive the nonironic honor, Lohan was seen pouncing on top of actor Dario Faiella in the middle of a party. During her three-day stay, the multi-rehabbed celeb was also photographed drinking from a bottle of champagne. Noel Boddie



Lohan and actor Dario Faiella in *I Know Who Killed Me*.

Meet Amber.

eMusic

Amber digs the Atlanta hip-hop scene. But when she wants something completely different, she's all about eMusic. Because, with over 2 million indie songs — and the ability to download them over her phone — she's always got the perfect track.

Fashion Updates

Amber's into keeping up with what's hot. So if she's not gossiping about the latest celebrity-style don'ts with her friends, she's getting fashion updates and pics sent to her phone.

MySpace Mobile

Amber's got a lot of friends. So she's always getting texts when one of her friends posts something on MySpace. Or she's posting a pic from her phone. It's nonstop.

Video Share

Sometimes she even shares live video of what she's buying with her girl Jen while they're chatting on the phone.

This is Amber's digital world.

You've never met her but now you know what she's like.

What can AT&T do for your digital world?SM
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▼ B 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ▲

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B 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ▲

FLOOR 10

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BURNER

11/20/07

Sporting a nostril impacted with a suspicious-looking white substance



11/22/07

Leaving to perform (disastrously) at Brixton Academy



11/27/07

Catching up on some sleep and nicotine on her way to a clinic



12/02/07

Walking the streets, crying, in bra and bare feet at 5:50 A.M.

DIVA 911

When **AMY WINEHOUSE**'s husband, Blake Fielder-Civil, was sent to jail in November (for allegedly manipulating a witness in his assault trial), the singer exhibited an insatiable appetite for late-night ice pops and public displays of undress, was seen rocking a variety of arm sores, went on an island vacation with an ex-boyfriend and cut off her trademark beehive. Meanwhile, in prison, Fielder-Civil failed a drug test, thus dimming his prospects for freedom and prompting rumors of a Sid-and-Nancy suicide pact. As these photos show, life without her hubby has been far from sobering.



12/04/07

Digging into a box of Mr. Freeze ice pops at 4 A.M.



12/07/07

Looking wide-eyed on a post-prison-visit deli spree



12/07/07

Visiting her husband at prison, where he'll be until at least late January



12/05/07

Frantically removing her pants in the back of a car



12/05/07

Letting loose a wad of phlegm at paparazzi



12/10/07

Bearing scary sores as she arrives too late, for the second time, to see Fielder-Civil



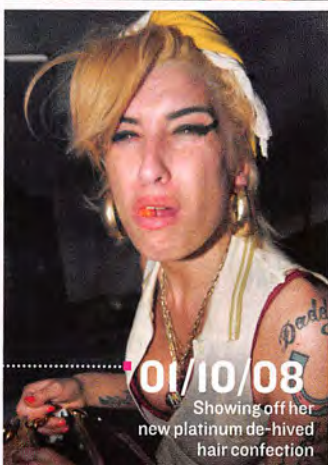
12/20/07

Preparing for another prison visit, her last before her husband failed a drug test



01/05/08

Waving hello while on vacation in Barbados



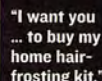
01/10/08

Showing off her new platinum de-hived hair confection



LE
JEAN
DE

MARITHÉ
FRANÇOIS
GIRBAUD



BLAKE LEWIS

Verdict

Igloo-building? Accidental onstage nudity? Being-gay rumors? This guy rocks hard!

OUT NOW AUDIO DA' DREAM (IS/VEISTA)



More people searched for the lyrics to **Rihanna's** 'Umbrella' than any other song in 2007, according to the Google Zeitgeist's audit. **Soulja Boy Tell'Em's** 'Crank That' (Soulja Boy) came in second. Hannah Montana had the most Googled roux, far exceeding its closest competition, the Rolling Stones' roux.

WORD!



"I'M KIND OF A DOUCHE BAG."
JOHN MAYER

Thanks for the
mammaries.

The movie's climax comes when an apparently naked Wentz gets slapped in the face by costar Bonnie Muirhead (of Fox's *Hell's Kitchen*) while they are engaging in onscreen humping. The plot follows the two young lovers as they break into a house and hold its owner hostage. Fans of Wentz's music, or of film in general, shouldn't be concerned. "I'm not into being an actor," he says.

Jon Cople

Weird Band Alert

UNCLE MONSTERFACE

The world's foremost proponents of "sock-puppet rock"

What's going on here? A Brooklyn electro-pop trio that has a keyboard player and performs alongside sock puppets.

OK, so Uncle Monsterface is the tall guy in the mask. What's the musical experience like? "We're like going to 50,000 Super Bowls in outer space, covered in gravel and gold and surrounded by foxy women who are singing Journey," says drummer Marty Allen. *30... (feat. Vorn)*



Kermit's short-lived rock phase

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ALMOST FAMOUS

LEONA LEWIS

This 22-year-old British sensation has a supersize voice and no dark side to speak of—yet

By JONAH WEINER Photograph by JOE LALLY

WE'VE SEEN IT before: A British pop phenomenon gets the local press's knickers in a bunch, keeps registers ringing nonstop, tries to repeat the trick on American soil and—*poof!*—disappears into a cloud of indifference. So why is Leona Lewis, the 22-year-old Londoner who currently holds the record for the fastest-selling debut in U.K. history, so unfazed by her impending stab at U.S. stardom? Because for roughly two years she's been proving herself to Simon Cowell day in and day out. "At this point, I can't imagine a tougher audience than him," Lewis says.

In 2006, Lewis won *The X-Factor*, England's answer to *American Idol*, on the strength of her supersize voice—a little Celine, a little Toni, a lot Mariah. At one point in the competition, Cowell declared her "the best contestant I have ever had across any of these shows." When it came time to put together Lewis's debut, *Spirit*, U.S. pop mogul Clive Davis joined Cowell at the helm, assembling a zillion-dollar songwriting team that included Stargate (Beyoncé, Rihanna) and Max Martin (Britney, Kelly Clarkson). What unites the songs is the way they pair sweeping, heartstring melodies with unexpectedly hard-hitting drums. "I love big ballads," Lewis says. "But I wanted to make them contemporary."

Her first single is "Bleeding Love," a slow-burner that would be appropriate both at senior proms and in S&M dungeons. "I don't really have a dark side," Lewis insists. "I'm very positive." So no Kelly Clarkson-esque follow-up full of snarls and moans? "I'm not ruling it out," she says. "Depends what horrible things happen to me this year!"

OUT NOW *Spirit* (J)

All About Me!

LEAST GLAMOROUS JOB

"I worked as a Pizza Hut waitress for two years to afford studio time."

CD I CAN'T STOP PLAYING

"I've been listening to a lot of Radiohead. I love rock bands—Maroon 5, Muse, the Kooks, they're all great."

FIRST SONG I EVER WROTE

"I was 12, and it was a song about being at school. I called it 'School Jam,' and it went, 'School jam is the flavor for me.' It was very abstract!"



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"Rawwwwk!"

Whistle While You Work

FREDERICK J. LANCELEY

This hostage negotiator offers the ultimate tough-guy play list for dealing with intense, life-threatening situations

"ON THE ROAD AGAIN" WILLIE NELSON

"Whether I'm negotiating a hostage situation in a penitentiary siege or a multimillion-dollar ransom in a foreign country, I always feel a rush of adrenaline before I leave for the job. As I'm packing up my things, I frequently find myself singing this song. It gets me pumped."

"AGAINST THE GRAIN" GARTH BROOKS

"Garth Brooks sings, 'I ain't too diplomatic.' There have been occasions when I had to go against the grain and question management. About three days into the Waco hostage situation in 1993, I told the FBI how it was all going to end; nobody believed me, and I got kicked out of Waco. I ain't too diplomatic, either."

"NEUTRON DANCE" THE POINTER SISTERS

"After 10 hours of working a suicide, you need contrast. You can't help but get sucked in to their problems, so you gotta listen to something to get yourself up again. The Pointer Sisters are uplifting and funny."

"AMERICA" RAY CHARLES

"My last interview before the FBI was with Hallmark. When you're on one side of the door, and the guy on the other side has a shotgun and says he'll never be taken alive, you're thinking, *What the hell? I could've been selling Mother's Day cards!* But I'm here for God and country; this song reminds me why I risk my life."

NEWS ROUNDUP

Chris Cornell is seeking a restraining order against Matthew Turner, a former sheriff's deputy. The ex-Soundgarden singer claims Turner broke into his home and "urinated," and was hired by Cornell's ex-wife, Susan Silver, to kill him.

In December, **Tori Amos** stopped a concert mid-song in order to curse out two female fans. The singer was displeased the girls weren't paying more attention and had them escorted from their front-row seats. "I reserve those seats for people who appreciate music," she yelled. "Get the fuck out of my show!"

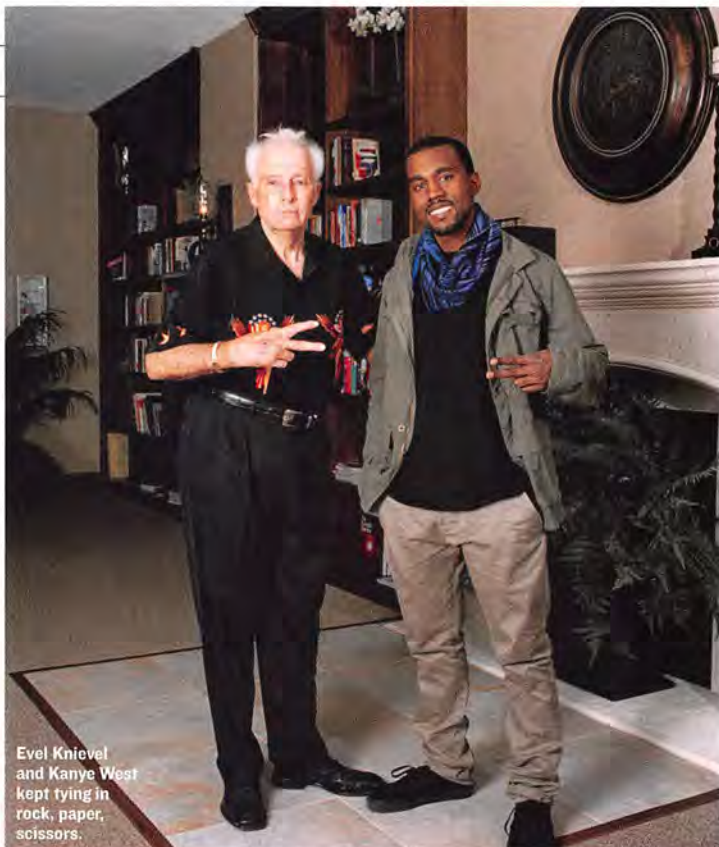
Country star **Chris Cagle** was issued a citation for misdemeanor assault after he allegedly punched a man in the face in an Arizona nightclub. Trouble started when Cagle declined a female fan's request for his autograph. According to police, the woman became angry and called Cagle "every name in the book" before the "Chicks Dig It" singer lashed out at her boyfriend.

WORD!



"IT'S LIKE A TRACTOR EXHAUST PIPE!"

Victoria "Posh Spice" Beckham on her husband's member



Evel Knievel and Kanye West kept tying in rock, paper, scissors.

EVEL'S BUCKET LIST

Evel Knievel buries hatchet with **KANYE WEST**, then dies

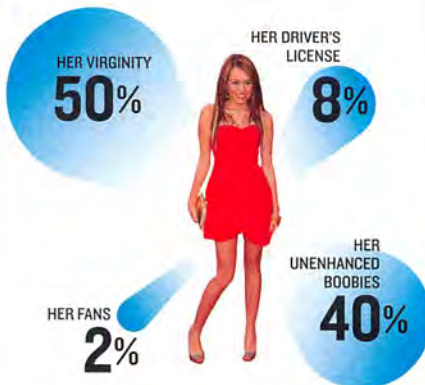
IN ONE OF the few feuds involving a rapper to end peacefully, Kanye West and Robert Craig "Evel" Knievel settled a trademark lawsuit days before the legendary daredevil passed away. Controversy brewed in 2006 over West's "Touch the Sky" video, in which the rapper, wearing Knievel's signature red-white-and-blue jumpsuit, attempted to leap a canyon on a motorcycle. Knievel claimed West used his image to "promote [West's] filth to the world."

The thrill seeker, however, was in a more forgiving mood as he welcomed West into his Montana home this past November for peace talks. "I thought he was a wonderful guy and quite a gentleman," Knievel said. Three days later, the metal-plated stuntman died at the age of 69 after a lengthy battle with diabetes and pulmonary fibrosis. *Dan Reilly*

Blender's Burning Question

What will Miley Cyrus/Hannah Montana lose first?

Survey says



Reader wisdom

"HER POP'S HOT... I'D HIT THAT WHEN SHE'S OF AGE."

BENNIEGB, PORTSMOUTH, VA

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Robert Smith
unveils his
new "goth
hobo" look.

In the Studio

"MORE UPBEAT!"

Goth-rock mopesters the **CURE** get cheery on their 13th album

ATTENTION ALL CURE fans: Better find some wood to knock on. For their 13th studio album (and first in four years) the U.K. miserablists are basically telling bad luck to suck it—prepping two discs comprising 13 tracks each, with "13" imagery running throughout. "I have never been superstitious," singer Robert Smith says. "Full moons are my favorite." The godfathers of gloom have been recording the album since last summer, when they decamped to an old converted farmhouse—Smith calls it "lived-in"—in the English countryside. "There's a garden outside, and stables," he says. "It's quite genteel." It's also just a few miles from the icy waters of the English Channel. Has Smith applied his waterproof guyliner and gone for a dip? "I've looked at it," he says, chuckling. "I'm not much of a swimmer. Only after a few beers."

Although the album features its fair share of despair (Smith calls "Christmas Without You," about the death of a close friend, "one of the most unhappy things we've ever recorded"), he says it is, on the whole, "more upbeat." The fastest songs are "manic psycho rock," and "Don't Say Anything" stars a colorful cast of aliens and freaks.

"It's been a fun couple of months," Smith says. "Certainly the most fun I've ever had in a studio." Might the black-clad master of melancholy actually be approaching (*gasp*) happiness? He laughs. "I'll be happy when it's done." *Josh Eells*

All About Our Album

PRODUCER Robert Smith

STUDIO Parkgate Studio, Battle, England

LAST ALBUM *The Cure*, 2004

NEW ALBUM As yet untitled, due this spring

Also in the Studio

Experimental freak-rockers **ANIMAL COLLECTIVE** are in the studio working on a new album, their ninth in eight years, due this fall ... Shoegaze forebears **MY BLOODY VALENTINE** are working on their first album since 1991's *Loveless*, combining songs recorded in the early '90s with several newer ones, due later this year ... Strokes guitarist **ALBERT HAMMOND JR.** will follow up 2007's *Yours to Keep* with his second solo release, due this spring.



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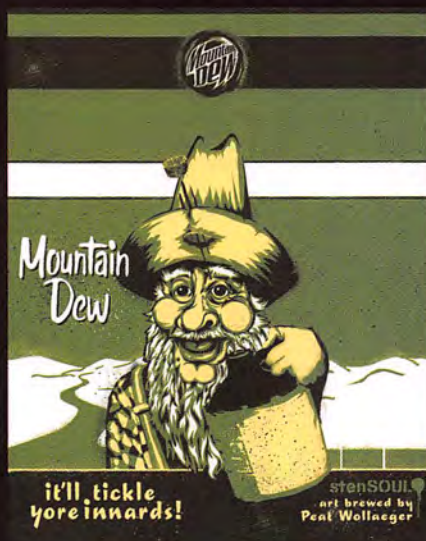
DEZ

"DEW is about excitement and adventure."



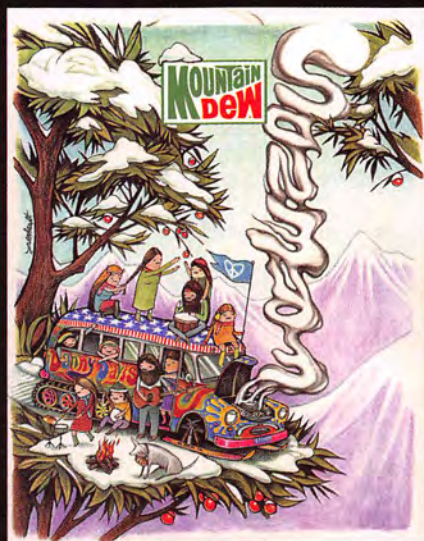
HAZE

"Super vibrant, pop art kind of vibe."



PEAT WOLLAEGER

"Vintage bottle of MOUNTAIN DEW."



SCOTT LENHARDT & DANNY DAVIS

"Like hanging out with a friend I hadn't seen in a while, ..."



TROY DENNING

"A magic elixir from a samurai's pouch."

VOLUME 1 - 2008

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THE 33 MOST WANTED SONGS IN AMERICA

Sorry, boys: The R&B babes rule on this month's chart

1

RIHANNA FEAT. NE-YO "HATE THAT I LOVE YOU"

GOOD GIRL GONE BAD

She's taken to dressing like a bondage-themed pro wrestler (well, in Switzerland this one time), which lends a shade of S&M intrigue to this ballad about love that hurts so good. Bring your whips and chains to London's O2 Arena on March 7.



HOW WE DID IT

aolmusic.com

The Most Wanted Songs chart is based on the number of audience searches, downloads and video plays on AOLmusic.com.

POSITION	TITLE	ARTIST	ALBUM/LABEL
1	"HATE THAT I LOVE YOU"	RIHANNA FEAT. NE-YO	GOOD GIRL GONE BAD DEF JAM
2	"LIKE YOU'LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN"	ALICIA KEYS	AS I AM J
3	"STOP AND STARE"	ONEREPUBLIC	DREAMING OUT LOUD INTERSCOPE
4	"WON'T GO HOME WITHOUT YOU"	MAROON 5	IT WON'T BE SOON BEFORE LONG A&M/OCTONE
5	"UNTIL THE END OF TIME"	JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE FEAT. BEYONCÉ	FUTURESEX/ LOVESOUNDS JIVE
6	"WITH YOU"	CHRIS BROWN	EXCLUSIVE JIVE
7	"FEEDBACK"	JANET JACKSON	DISCIPLINE ISLAND DEF JAM
8	"ALL-AMERICAN GIRL"	CARRIE UNDERWOOD	CARNIVAL RIDE IS/ARISTA NASHVILLE
9	"GET READY FOR THE FLOOR"	HOT CHIP	MADE IN THE DARK DFA/EMI
10	"LONG ROAD TO RUIN"	FOO FIGHTERS	ECHOES, SILENCE, PATIENCE & GRACE RCA
11	"PIECE OF ME"	BRITNEY SPEARS	BLACKOUT JIVE
12	"SECOND, MINUTE OR HOUR"	JACK PEÑATE	MATINÉE XL
13	"NO AIR"	JORDIN SPARKS FEAT. CHRIS BROWN	JORDIN SPARKS JIVE
14	"SENSUAL SEDUCTION"	SNOOP DOGG	EGO TRIPPIN' Geffen
15	"I AM THE CLUB"	PLIES	THE REAL TESTAMENT ATLANTIC
16	"ONE WORD"	ELLIOTT YAMIN	ELLIOTT YAMIN HICKORY
17	"ARETHA, SING ONE FOR ME"	CAT POWER	JUKEBOX MATADOR
18	"OUTTA MY HEAD"	ASHLEE SIMPSON	BITTERSWEET WORLD Geffen
19	"FOUNDATIONS"	KATE NASH	MADE OF BRICKS Geffen
20	"TAKE YOU THERE"	SEAN KINGSTON	SEAN KINGSTON EPIC
21	"ELECTRIC FEEL"	MGMT	ORACULAR SPECTACULAR COLUMBIA
22	"BREAK ANOTHA"	BLAKE LEWIS	AUDIO DAY DREAM IS/ARISTA
23	"FALLING IN LOVE AT A COFFEE SHOP"	LANDON PIGG	RCA
24	"IF I HAD EYES"	JACK JOHNSON	SLEEP THROUGH THE STATIC BRUSHFIRE
25	"GOOD LIFE"	KANYE WEST FEAT. T-PAIN	GRADUATION ROC-A-FELLA
26	"WHEN I'M GONE"	SIMPLE PLAN	SIMPLE PLAN ATLANTIC
27	"ILYENA"	THE MARS VOLTA	THE BEDLAM IN GOLIATH STRUMMER
28	"WORK THAT"	MARY J. BLIGE	GROWING PAINS MATRIARCH Geffen
29	"I REMEMBER"	KEYSHIA COLE	JUST LIKE YOU Geffen
30	"BIG CASINO"	JIMMY EAT WORLD	CHASE THIS LIGHT INTERSCOPE
31	"LOVE LIKE THIS"	NATASHA BEDINGFIELD FEAT. SEAN KINGSTON	POCKETFUL OF SUNSHINE EPIC
32	"SEE THESE BONES"	NADA SURF	LUCKY BARSUK
33	"SOULJA GIRL"	SOULJA BOY TELL'EM FEAT. i15	SOULJABOYTELLEM .COM INTERSCOPE

WEEK ENDING // JANUARY 20, 2008



4

MAROON 5 "WON'T GO HOME WITHOUT YOU"

IT WON'T BE SOON BEFORE LONG

This spring, when they're not doing yoga or doing supermodels, Adam Levine and Co. will be laying soul-funk magic on the lucky residents of Tokyo (3/10-11).



8

CARRIE UNDERWOOD "ALL-AMERICAN GIRL"

CARNIVAL RIDE

Her ex is shacking up with Jessica Simpson, but this Nashville sweetheart knows who America's real favorite is. Gambling-addicted fans can see her live when she visits Atlantic City (2/15) and Biloxi, Mississippi (3/1).



10

FOO FIGHTERS "LONG ROAD TO RUIN"

ECHOES, SILENCE, PATIENCE & GRACE

It may be about Iraq; it may be about Britney. Either way, this heat-seeking missile will rule live when the Foes play it at an arena near you this month.



Yo hey, I'm Paul, the original Dollar Menunaire. I'll admit it. I'm kind of a risk taker. Last week,



www.mcdonalds.com/dollar

I threw in this red t-shirt with a load of whites. A sock came out pink, but no pain, no gain. So I like a safe bet sometimes to, ya know, keep my balance. As luck would have it, there's the Dollar Menu. It's pretty much loaded with **choice choices**. There's no wrong answer in the whole bunch. So it keeps my yin balanced with my yang. So to speak.

Dollar  Menu

i'm lovin' it.

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"Hail Satan ... and my
ophthalmologist!"

RINGO

The oldest surviving member of the Fab Four answers your questions about his many brushes with death, who was the best drummer in the Beatles and why he doesn't remember the '70s

By ADAM HIGGINBOTHAM Photograph by CHRIS BUCK

STARR

★ “PEACE AND LOVE!” Ringo Starr announces, extending his fingers into a familiar V-shaped greeting and taking a seat in a Beverly Hills hotel suite. “Peace and love! It’s only been a hundred years, but I’m still trying!” At 67, the world’s oldest surviving Beatle remains as ready as ever with droll non sequiturs—delivered in a Liverpudlian accent undiminished by years of living in L.A. and Monaco—but has apparently also made the hippie mantra his personal catchphrase.

After losing much of the '70s and '80s in an epic blur of alcoholism and drug abuse, broken only by a string of solo hits like “It Don’t Come Easy” and “Back Off Boogaloo,” Ringo and his second wife, Barbara Bach, finally cleaned up in 1988. Since then, Starr has established his All-Starr band as a fixture of the summer-tour schedule and released a series of solo albums, the latest of which, *Liverpool 8*, is dedicated to the area where he grew up. And like the other half of the Beatles’ rhythm section, Ringo has no plans to stop writing and >>

"Hey—is this one of those 'jazz cigarettes?'"

recording. "Two of us are in heaven," he says. "And two of us are still doing it. I enjoy the process and hanging out with other musicians."

And as he settles down to face the *Blender* inquisition, Ringo admits that after 45 years in the public eye as a drummer, actor, painter and occasional furniture designer, there are few surprises left for him. He's unfazed by the fact that his childhood home is being taken down brick by brick and reconstructed in a museum, and he regards the news that the British public has been petitioning the queen to give him a knighthood with typically arid humor. "It wasn't a surprise," he says. "It's about time they called me 'Sir.' But I'm holding out for a dukedom, personally ..."

What was the last place you visited where nobody recognized you?

Cowbellz, Pasadena, CA

I don't think that's happened yet. Walking along the streets, you'll see the nudges. I've been to Nepal, and they wave at me. It's just how it is.

What's the biggest difference between playing live with the All-Stars and playing live with the Beatles?

Vandelay2day, Beacon, NY

The technology. Now you have a million amps behind you—all the amplification and lights. The Beatles went out with a house P.A. and little amps. If the Beatles had been *now*, we could have done "I Am the Walrus." But we didn't have it then. Besides, in 1965 we were turning into really bad musicians because we couldn't hear ourselves due to the volume of the audience. I was going downhill as a musician, and so was everyone else in the band. We did 25 minutes; thanks to the Who and Zep-pelin, everybody has to do two hours now.

Jason Schwartzman just played you in *Walk Hard*, and you've been portrayed in films and TV movies by different actors. Do you think anyone has gotten you right?

Walrusboy6, Texarkana, TX

I don't know; if they do fake Beatle movies, I don't watch them. And I don't read Beatle

books written by people who weren't Beatles. What's that one Peter Frampton was in? The *Sgt. Pepper's* movie? Am I in that? I've never seen it. *He's* sad he did it—and he should be.

In the '60s, it was possible to buy Beatles socks, hairbrushes and even bread, packaged as Ringo Rolls. Is that the most ridiculous piece of merchandising you've seen your face on?

KeepKobe94, San Diego, CA

The bread just had my name on it; it didn't have a visual. It was '63 or '64. I've got a photo of that. They took it to all of our mothers and conned them to stand there with the bread rolls. Those were the days!

Paul once wrote you a message saying, "You're the greatest drummer in the world. Really." How do you rate him on the Beatles songs he drummed on?

Sneak_a_peek, Grants Pass, OR

Oh, he's terrible. You know, he's fine on those songs, but he has one style and it's always

there. As a drummer, Paul McCartney is the finest, most melodic bass player today.

I've read a story about one of Paul's daughters turning to him when she was a child and asking, "Dad, are you Paul McCartney?" Was there a moment when your children first realized that you were Ringo Starr?

Sarah Totter, Ellicott City, MD

When Zak and Jason were babies, they would be confused to see me on TV and on the settee with them. That's all. But when my grandson was 3 or 4, he stood behind my chair and sang in a low voice, "We all live in a yellow submarine." He'd spotted me. He was letting me know he knew I was that guy in *Yellow Submarine*. Which was a big compliment, seeing as it's animated.

What's the worst rumor you've ever heard about yourself?

Banshee4lyfe, Ogden, UT

When they told my mother I was dead. Some newspaper did it in the '60s. She was a bit worried about that, until I called her. That was the worst one. It wasn't so bad for me—I knew I wasn't dead. But my mother was worried. I said, "I'll tell you if I'm dead, OK? Don't worry till you hear from me!"

Were you surprised that Zak became a drummer? And is it true that you arranged for Keith Moon to give him lessons?

Goodnight George, Orlando, FL

I wasn't surprised. We had drums in the house, and he wanted to play them, so I showed him a few things. Keith was known to all my children as Uncle Keith, because we were great friends and he'd be at the house. I didn't ask Keith to give Zak lessons. But when Zak was 10, I gave him a drum kit for his birthday—the bass drum, snare drum, toms. And as I gave him this, a truck came up outside the door: Keith had sent him a set of a hundred drums. Keith was very expressive. >>

★
"I RECORDED A LOT OF THINGS WHEN I WAS DRUNK—BECAUSE I WAS A DRUNK."

Fila **Corner Of**



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POLO GROUNDS MUSIC ARTIST



RINGO STARR

You ran a furniture-design company in the '70s. What was your most successful piece?

Sexyrobot, Madison, WI

I was a designer with a partner named Robin Cruikshank. He came to me; he had this gig to design a nightclub, and he knew I lived in nightclubs, so he thought I might have some idea of how to do it. That's how it started. We designed tables and chairs and shelving systems—all out of steel and glass. The most successful piece was the Rolls-Royce table I designed. We had an exhibition in London, and we needed something to catch the eye of the press. I asked Rolls-Royce to sell me some of their radiators, and we'd put glass between them and make it a table. They said no, but somebody managed to find 10, and we turned them into tables—and it was in every newspaper in Britain.

In 1974, while you were working on Harry Nilsson's *Pussy Cats* album, you shared a villa with him, John Lennon and Keith Moon. What was the average day like?

Pat Kelley, Arlington, MA

You'd have to ask someone who remembers. The average day lasted three weeks. There was a lot of non-prescription medication goin' down, as well as prescription stuff. But it didn't matter how we partied—and we did party hard—we got on with the job. We went into the studio and made that album.



Starr at a party with some other guys, 1967.

You've said that you recorded the vocals to "Photograph" when you were drunk. Was it hard to go back to recording sober?

Dakotafan, Mitchell, SD

I recorded a lot of things when I was drunk—because I was a drunk. I felt I could deal with life more easily with a few drinks. Problem was, few turned into many. Living sober was difficult. I had to learn to go to a show, never mind be *in* a show, to be in a studio and play. A lot of other parts of life I had to start again.

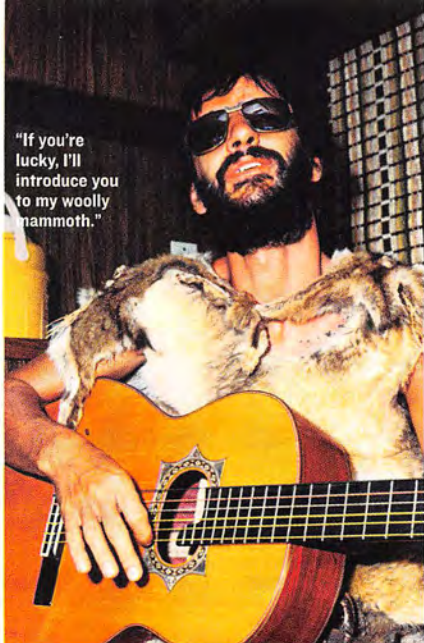
Can you still remember any of the prehistoric language from *Caveman*—the 1981 comedy where you met Barbara Bach?

Peterpants, Tempe, AZ

[Immediately] "Atouk *alunda* Lana." Barbara was called Lana in the movie; I was Atouk and *alunda* means "love." So it means "I love you." There were only 12 words in the whole movie: *Haraka* meant "fire"; *zug zug* meant "making love." That's all I can remember.



God of Efficiency!



"If you're lucky, I'll introduce you to my woolly mammoth."

Do you remember the last time you had a drink, and what it was?

Zeke.Bella, Greenwich, CT

Uh ... no. I remember the start of having that drink. I drank cognac, and then I blacked out, and I came to full of fear. I'd done that many times. And then a couple of days later I ended up in rehab. It was always gonna be cognac. Unless it was during the day, when it would have been vodka.

With the Beatles, you were once lucky to escape alive from a riot in the Philippines, and in 1980 you were involved in a bad car crash. What's the closest you've come to death?

Doug_Flynn, Lexington, KY

The car crash. I was thrown out of the car. That could have gone either way. I walked away; we went to the hospital and they gave us a two-mil Valium and a cup of tea. Barbara had a neck brace. We lost the car. It was a huge Mercedes, and I turned it into a coffee table. I had it crushed.

Which of your songs do you consider the most underrated?

Funnydrummer12, Lewiston, ID

They're all underrated, if you ask me.

You're a big country-music fan. Do you have a favorite country lyric?

How_we_handroll, Cherry Hill, NJ

"I've got more pain than a house full of windows." I always liked that line. I'm not telling you where it's from—you'll have to search on Google, everybody!

Is it true that you learned to play chess while you were making *Sgt. Pepper's*?

Crappy1972, Rockland, ME

Yes. I played chess with the roadies all through making that record. There was a lot of time that the geniuses were putting on

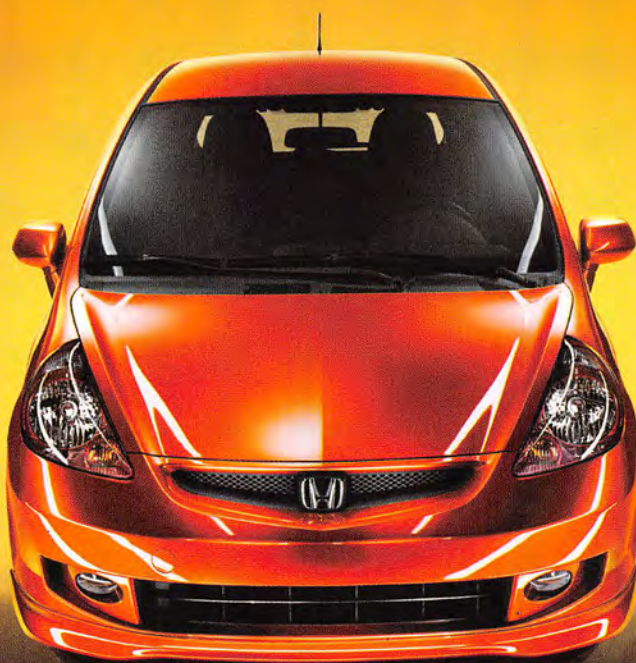
★
"IN 1965, I WAS GOING
DOWNHILL AS A MUSICIAN,
AND SO WAS EVERYONE
ELSE IN THE BEATLES."

harmonies and orchestras, so the track would be done as far as I was concerned, and I'd have to wait days to put a tambourine on. It was something to keep busy. You have to be really quiet if they're putting on overdubs.

What was the most you were ever offered for a Beatles reunion? And what was the closest you came to saying yes?

Drug Rug Thug, Hannibal, MO

We came close—well, we never came *really* close, but we actually talked to each other about it when they offered us, like, a billion bucks in '71 or '72. Millions and millions and millions ... Anyway, it was a *lot* of money, and it deserved a phone call from the four of us, so we did. And I forget who even offered this to us, but we were supposed to go on after a man fought a shark. The first act was a man who was going to fight a crazy shark! And then we'd get up there and play "She Loves You." We turned it down, of course. [BLENDER]



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From left: drummer Zac Farro, touring guitarist Taylor York, bassist Jeremy Davis, singer Hayley Williams and guitarist Josh Farro stop traffic in San Francisco.

(((COLLECT CALL FROM ...

PARAMORE

Each month, one lucky rock band phones *Blender* HQ for seven straight days, just to, you know, share. Now on the line: Tennessee pop-punk moppets Paramore

By JOSH EELLS Photographs by MARK PETERSON

Day 1

DECEMBER 2, 2:17 P.M.

Singer Hayley Williams, 19, rings us from the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa, where the band is playing a holiday radio festival.

"DUDE, I'M SO excited. I just met Jim Adkins from Jimmy Eat World, which is my favorite band ever. I was sitting in a hallway, chugging orange juice—I think I'm getting sick—and I heard this voice say, 'Excuse me.' I turned around and just started choking. Turns out he wasn't saying hi to me—I was just in his way. But it was still rad.

"The show in West Palm Beach last night was mayhem. It was at this big amphitheater. The security sucked, and kids were flying over barricades, losing arms and legs. I was so stoked. It was also, like, 90,000 degrees and pouring—somehow it always starts pouring 10 minutes before we play. We definitely make it rain.

"Our label [Fueled by Ramen] is based here, so we've got some merch meetings and stuff this afternoon before our show. I'm also going to try to get in Jim Adkins's way a few more times. Wish me luck." >>



When you're
emo, this is
a size XL.



Josh Farro
practices his
MySpace face
in the mirror.



"MY MOM SOMETIMES
WAKES UP AT 2 IN THE
MORNING JUST TO
TEXT ME AND SAY, GO
TO BED."

ZAC FARRO



"Are you sure
this is how you
do cocaine?"

Day 2

DECEMBER 3, 2:01 P.M.

It's an off day for the band; guitarist Josh Farro checks in from his hotel room in Norfolk, Virginia.

"I really liked Tampa. Normally, radio shows are a bunch of dudes waving their middle fingers, but last night was more like skinny emo guys in girl jeans. Afterward we got right on the bus. We don't really party: [Bassist] Jeremy [Davis] is 23, so he'll have a beer every once in a while, but the rest of us are underage—I'm 20. Sometimes when we're in the U.K. we'll have a drink and feel really cool, but never in the States. Mostly we just play a lot of *Pictionary*.

"At 1 in the morning, we made a Wal-Mart run. We bought some food for the road—chips, candy, Cap'n Crunch—and I got myself some sweet Homer Simpson pajama pants. I'm actually wearing them right now. And whenever we're at Wal-Mart we stock up on hunting camo and knives. Hey, we're from the South, OK?"

Day 3

DECEMBER 4, 2:09 P.M.

After wrapping up sound check in Norfolk, drummer Zac Farro calls to brief us about the band's day off.

"First of all, we got to shower, which is a rare occasion. Then we had lunch at Chili's—they have these new Honey-Chipotle Chicken Crispers, kinda spicy, kinda awesome—and then we went shopping at our favorite mall across the street. We only got recognized once, but that's probably because it was a fancy mall—no Hot Topic.

"For dinner, we all went out for sushi. These girls from the nightclub next door kept insisting we take vodka shots with them. I was like, 'Um, I'm kind of 17...' I've never done a shot before; my parents want me to wait till I'm old enough. I talk to them at least once a day. My mom sometimes wakes up at 2 in the morning just to text me and say, *Go to bed*. I get homesick a lot; I haven't been home for my birthday in two years. But at least I have my brother here."

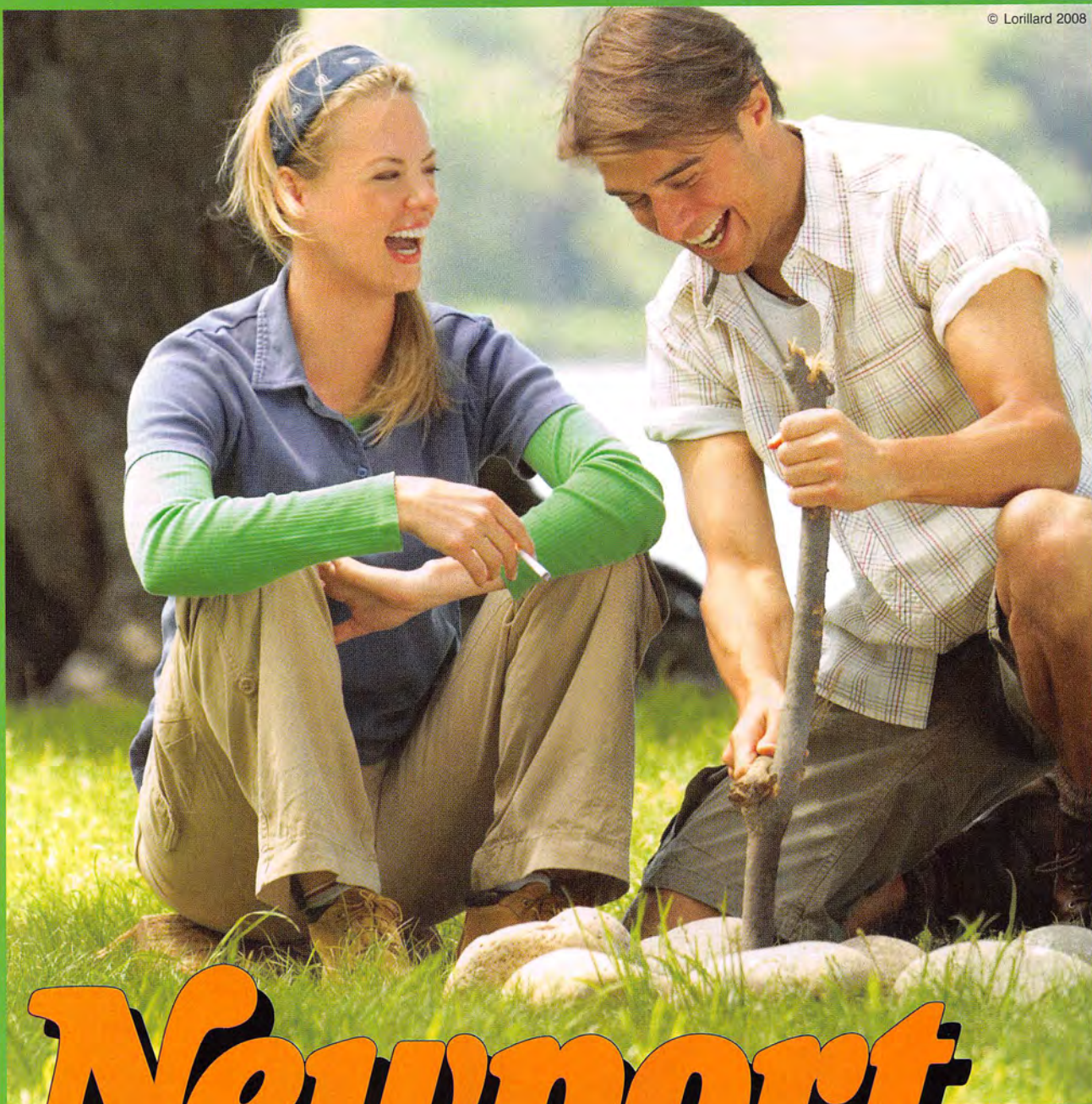
Day 4

DECEMBER 5, 2:58 P.M.

During a daylong stopover in Nashville, bassist Jeremy Davis phones from his parents' house.

"I had to go to the hospital last night. During our second song, I was head-banging and I slammed my face into the kick-drum mic. My entire bottom lip split open—I was gushing blood the whole show. They gave me three stitches at the ER so my lip wasn't hanging off. The nurses were like, 'You guys must have played an awesome show, because we've got 25 other kids in here, too.'

"It's great to be home, though. We were just here for Thanksgiving, but it's always nice to see the folks. I'm also excited to work on my car—I've got a '91 Acura Integra I'm fixing up. Got a motor from Japan and everything. Then I'm gonna go see *Saw IV*, meet my buddies at some dive bar, throw some steaks on the grill and hang out till 3 in the morning." >>



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PARAMORE



"Dear eight-pound six-ounce Baby Jesus."

Day 6

DECEMBER 7, 3:31 P.M.

Shortly after wrapping up a photo shoot in San Francisco, Hayley gives us a call.

"Last night was miserable. We were flying coach, which is probably good, because those business-class guys hate us. But our connecting flight in Dallas got delayed for, like, three hours, and when we finally landed, it was freezing rain. We went to this diner all soaking wet.

"I didn't pack anything for this trip—just one shirt and a hoodie—so I'll probably have to go shopping later. But otherwise we're just sound-checking, getting ready for the show. Before we go onstage, Josh usually rounds us all up to pray and listen to some loud music—anything from As I Lay Dying to John Mayer. Then we huddle up and do this football drill: We run in place and take turns drumming on each other's hands.

"I'm always the last one to be ready, but it's only because I'm a bad planner, not because I'm taking forever to put on my makeup. If I'm going out and feeling girly, it might take me 20 minutes, but before shows I usually just smear it on. I know some emo boys who take much longer than that."

Day 7

DECEMBER 8, 6:02 P.M.

On the last day of our correspondence, Hayley phones from L.A., where the band is performing at KROQ's Almost Acoustic Christmas show.

"We're playing on kind of a weird bill: Rise Against, Linkin Park—real bro-type bands. But I like being the odd one out. Sometimes girls aren't taken very seriously in our scene, both in the songs and in real life, and that can be pretty frustrating. I used to get annoyed when people only paid attention to me because I had boobs. Now I use it to my advantage. We've got a ton of girl fans, and it's rad being someone who they can look up to. I have two younger sisters, 4 and 11, and they're already getting stoked about music—they're like little beams of hope. It's nice to show them that sex doesn't have to be all MTV'd out and that chicks don't have to be Tila Tequila to be successful.

"All in all, life is great. I'm single for the first time in a while, and I'm enjoying relearning who I am. In the past two weeks I've had my record go gold, eaten dinner with John Mayer, moved into my first apartment, sung onstage with Jimmy Eat World and been nominated for a Grammy. That's pretty perfect." [BLENDER]



Williams cranking that Superman onstage in San Francisco.

“CHICKS DON'T HAVE TO BE TILA TEQUILA TO BE SUCCESSFUL.”
HAYLEY WILLIAMS

Day 5

DECEMBER 6, 2:36 P.M.

As she sits at the Nashville airport waiting for a flight to San Francisco, Hayley Williams rings with some big news.

"Hey, man. I'm just hanging at the gate, reading *In Touch* magazine. It's like cocaine for girls. But I'm also totally freaking out. This morning, while I was packing, I got a call from the head of our label saying we'd been nominated

for a Grammy for Best New Artist. My roommate and I started screaming our heads off! Neither of us really has a girlish scream, though, so it was more like, 'Rawrrrrghhh!'

"I just moved into my own place, and last night I stayed up all night unpacking. My dad came over and helped me hang my new gold record, for *Riot!*, and the guys and I all made chocolate fondue. It looked like a bowl of turds, and it tasted terrible. Anyway, I haven't slept at all, so the Grammy news still hasn't sunk in yet. I don't even know how this works. What am I gonna wear?"

EELS

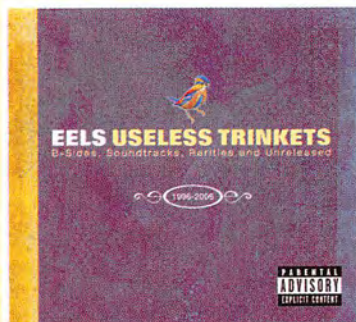
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"BORDERLINE"

This crush jam took Madge global—and she never quite forgave it

By JON DOLAN

IT WAS THE spring of 1984, and the dawn of the outerwear bra was ready to break. The question for 25-year-old pop ingenue Madonna wasn't *if* but *when*. She'd already released a couple of promising dance hits, but "Borderline" was where she went global. It's her first *Madonna* record: street-smart and pop-wise, sexually aggressive and emotionally complex, perfectly merging sound and image.

The song's bubbly electro beats and glimmering keyboard melody could soundtrack a New York street scene or a suburban bike ride to the Dairy Queen; the chirpy voice was playful but a little dangerous, ideal for her

MARCH
1984
24 YEARS
AGO THIS
MONTH

first vaguely suggestive lyrical metaphor: an allusion to a desire so exhilarating it almost seems terrifying. But the kicker was the video, her first MTV mega-hit, featuring the budding "Boy Toy" breakdancing in slow-mo, making out on an L.A. rooftop with one suitor and sipping champagne in a high-end photo shoot with another. Suddenly, America had a look (layered, torn, thrifted), an identity (available, tough, vulnerable) and a midriff to go with the sound. "Borderline" inaugurated a string of 17 Top 10 singles that didn't end until 1989.

It was the big break she'd been chasing

for years. After dropping out of the University of Michigan and moving to New York in 1978, Madonna Louise Ciccone quickly became scene queen of hip downtown clubs like Danceteria and the Paradise Garage. In the apt phrase of Danceteria regular Michael Rosenblatt, who signed Madonna to Sire Records in 1982, "She was wide open." But when it came time to record her first album, she wasn't all that open to the sound suggested by "Borderline" writer and producer Reggie Lucas, an R&B vet. Madonna complained it was too cluttered—"too many instruments, too much stuff going on," she protested, according to one biographer.

Her own tastes tended toward the minimal electro sound of her demo tape, which Lucas disdainfully called "disco." In no mood to take advice from an upstart, he wrapped up recording quickly. This left Madonna and her then-boyfriend, producer John "Jellybean" Benitez, to add uncredited production to several songs. Still, nothing came out exactly to her liking. Madge would later dismiss her self-titled 1983 debut as "aerobics" music. "She was unhappy with the whole damn [album]," Benitez later recalled.

Madonna did see eye-to-eye with Mary Lambert, who directed the "Borderline" video. "I sympathized with her immediately," Lambert recalled. The 32-year-old shared Madonna's very Catholic fixation on the holiness of pop iconography. Lambert presents Madonna as an angelic, if mischievous, ideal to be captured—by a highbrow photographer, by sexy gangland pursuers, by the viewer. Overnight, the saintly image of this graffiti-spraying succubus eclipsed all other fashion options for American teenage girls.

Back east, Madonna was learning that sainthood had its cost. "Right after the 'Borderline' video," Benitez says, "people would bother her." Riding her bike, riding the subway—soon they were all occupational hazards, thanks in part to a song the control freak hadn't had much control over. Soon after the hit's release, Madonna appeared in her first MTV interview. When puffy-haired VJ Mark Goodman asked about her new project, *Like a Virgin*, she replied, "It'll be out in June, once 'Borderline' fizzles out." Then she paused, clasped her hands and prayerfully lifted her eyes to the heavens: "Pleeeeeease." [BLENDER]

Vital Statistics

Song "Borderline" • **Artist** Madonna • **Album** *Madonna*
Label Sire • **Writer** Reggie Lucas • **Producer** Reggie Lucas • **Chart debut** March 10, 1984 • **Highest chart position** 10



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I just found out that *Wu-Tang* stands for “Witty Unpredictable Talent and Natural Game.” What other hip-hop acronyms don’t I know about?

Sergio Burke, Clearwater, Florida

Probably lots. But while some legit abbreviations do exist—like N.W.A for “Niggaz With Attitude” or BDP for “Boogie Down Productions”—most purported rap acronyms are actually “backronyms”: names with slightly goofy “meanings” tacked on after the fact. DMC, for instance, used to say his initials meant “Devastating Mic Controller,” but they’re actually just short for his given name: Darryl McDaniels. Same with KRS-One, whose handle derives from the name Kris and not from the phrase “Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone.” Other ridiculous examples include the Beastie Boys (“Boys Entering Anarchistic States Toward Inner Excellence”), Ja Rule (“Jeffrey Atkins Represents Unconditional Love’s Existence”), Memphis Bleek (“Makin’ Easy Money Pimpin’ Ho’s in Style”) and the Notorious B.I.G. (“Business Instead of Game”).

So, why all the abbreviating? “Using an acronym allows people to connect with you on two different levels,” NYC rapper Mims tells *Blender*. “Anytime people see those periods, they want to know what they mean.” Mims should know: He put his acronym on display in the title of his debut album, *Music Is My Savior*. Right? “Actually, Mims is just my last name: Shawn Mims.” Oh.

Wu-Tang: “Which one of us is U-God, again?”



Whenever I read about the Mars Volta the article mentions their crazy “time signatures.” What are those, anyway?

Devin Hayes, Pittsburgh

Geek-out alert! Put simply, time signature is the musical notation that tells you the rhythm of a song. It’s composed of two numbers: one on top, which denotes the song’s meter (essentially, the number of beats in a particular section of music), and one on bottom, which tells you the length of each beat (1 for a whole note, 2 for a half, 4 for a quarter, etc.).

Most pop songs are in 4/4 time, meaning their basic rhythm is four quarter notes (*BUM-bum-bum-bum*). But the braver and “artier” a band gets, the more complex time signatures they try. Some good songs for exploring? Radiohead’s new “15 Step” (5/4 time), Pink Floyd’s “Money” (7/4), Led Zeppelin’s “Black Dog” (5/4 guitar riffs, 4/4 drums) and the Dave Brubeck Quartet’s *Time Out*, a landmark



1959 jazz album that includes such odd meters as 11/4, 7/4 and 9/8.

Did Blondie’s Debbie Harry really get kidnapped by a serial killer?

Rolando Pasiagio, Lordsburg, NM

Maybe. In a 1989 interview, Harry reported having a frightening encounter with the notorious killer Ted Bundy. She was trying to hail a cab in New York one night in the early ’70s when a man pulled up

and offered her a ride. The singer got in and immediately noticed the car’s passenger-side interior had been stripped, with no door handle and no way to get out. Thinking fast, she squeezed her arm through an opening at the top of the window, pried open the door from the outside, jumped out and ran. She says it wasn’t until she saw a newspaper photo of Bundy following his 1989 execution that she realized he was the same guy.

Except he probably wasn’t. Bundy went on killing sprees in Washington State, Utah and Florida; there’s no evidence he ever visited New York.

Did Keith Richards hang out with the Queen of England once as a youngster?

Marie Hendricks, Oak Park, IL

Not quite. As the son of a factory worker, Richards wouldn’t have had much occasion to party at Buckingham Palace. But the future Rolling Stone was part

of a boys choir that sang Handel’s “Messiah” at Westminster Abbey during Elizabeth II’s 1953 coronation. According to a biography, 9-year-old Keef “used his tough, arrogant confidence to push himself to the front of the stage.” (No word on whether he was high.)

The guitarist had no love for the royal family by 2003, however: When Mick Jagger was knighted by Prince Charles that year, Richards declared the decoration “bollocks” and “a fucking paltry honor.” “It’s not what the Stones are about,” he said. “I wouldn’t let that family near me with a sharp stick, let alone a sword.”

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IN FOUR CHAOTIC, SELF-DESTRUCTIVE, FATEFUL YEARS,
BRITNEY SPEARS HIT ROCK BOTTOM ... AND KEPT ON FALLING. HERE, THE
INSIDE STORY ON ALL THAT WENT WRONG—HER MISSTEPS,
HER MELTDOWNS AND WHAT FRIENDS SAY MAY BE HER LAST HOPE FOR RESCUE
BY MICHAEL JOSEPH CROSS

THE PAPS

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS DANGLE FROM TREE BRANCHES IN FRONT of the Raffles L'Ermitage, the Beverly Hills hotel where Britney Spears slept last night—and where the paparazzi who keep watch over her now sit waiting. Although she owns a mansion in L.A., she often crashes in hotels because, the press speculate, her cupboards at home are bare: She likes to order room service. Spears is the only celebrity in the world under photographers' 24-hour watch, a surveillance mode usually reserved for prisoners and suicides. Some of the core group of 15 or so lensmen who call themselves "her paps" pass the stakeout hours online, chatting with women via wireless laptop connections. Some smoke pot. Felix, the team captain for X17, the paparazzi agency with the closest ties to Britney, occasionally looks down at his phone to find a text message from Sam Lutfi, Spears's confidant and de facto manager since last summer. Felix reads aloud: "She is inside."

"Britney is money," says another X17 photographer, standing next to the BMW that pictures of Britney have bought him. Someone tells the story of the day they followed her halfway to Las Vegas. She got takeout from Taco Bell at a rest stop in the desert. Then she turned the car around and drove home. "Britney is crazy," says another, bemused.

We have been waiting since about 10 A.M., and the thrill, at 8:39 P.M., as two hotel security guards appear at the entrance to the garage, is libidinal: When Britney's 612-horsepower Mercedes SL65 AMG shoots out of the driveway, rips west on Burton Way and up Foothill Road, it's sweet release.

Britney drives like a rabbit being chased across a field. Trailed by 15 cars, she signals right, then turns left. Glides into a left-turn lane, makes a right. On Wilshire Boulevard, slows from 50 miles per hour down to 15, then bangs an illegal U-turn into brake-screaming traffic. The driver in the lead mutters, "Bitch."

Then he's cut off by a Mercedes SL500 steered by Adnan Ghalib, a daredevil-fearless paparazzo who usually rides at the front of the pack.

If Britney has been in hiding all day and her paps have gotten no pictures, they hope for a red light at the top of Coldwater Canyon, the last intersection before her house. Tonight they're lucky. Britney stops; Ghalib pulls his Benz into the oncoming traffic lane, slams into park and the gang crowds around her car for just less than a minute.

Thus surrounded, Britney, in the same outfit she wore last night, doesn't look at the photographers but focuses on a point in the air a few inches in front of her nose, slowly pivoting her head on the axis of her neck, clicks and flashes dicing her movement like a strobe. She seems to be basking, and she seems to be trapped. Even her vehicle looks resigned: A smashed headlight has been out for weeks, and she's still driving on a spare tire from a flat she had in October. (Her paps changed it for her.)

When the light turns, the paps scramble back to their cars. Britney turns right, guns it and they let her go. The white car shrinks into the darkness, wriggling up Mulholland toward the gated community where she lives.

The Britney chase feels like a video game where, every moment, you're sure you're going to die; yet against all odds, despite all carelessness, nothing kills you. Even the photographers who do this every day admit that they're scared by it. One X17 videographer warns, "Someone is going to get hurt, man."

Without prompting, he mimes holding up a camera with one hand and dialing his phone with the other—explaining that the video of an accidental death cannot legally be sold, unless the cameraman can prove he was calling 911 at the same time. Clearly, he's given this endgame some thought. There's no way not to ask: *Would a video of Britney's death be the ultimate prize?*

"That would be horrible," he says. "No, no. Nobody wants that."

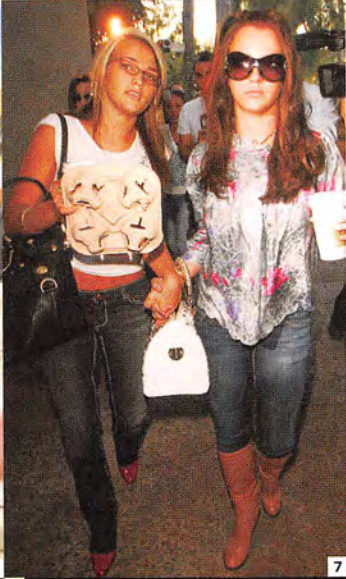
2. THE POP STAR

ASIDE FROM STARBUCKS FRAPPUCCINOS, BRITNEY'S PRIMARY nourishment nowadays is the attention of paparazzi, who slake the public's unquenchable thirst for details of her travails. Britney has been a figure of fascination since her debut in 1999, back when she was everything a girl was, and wasn't, supposed to be. The 17-year-old small-town Southern Christian Mouseketeer virgin-sexpot became a superstar—Lolita, Cinderella and Elvis Presley all in one—by tarding up a schoolgirl's uniform and shimmying down the halls of a high school in the video for "... Baby One More Time," her first single. Britney's image was a pop masterpiece, fashioned in her songs' and videos' provocative blend of innocence and experience. She grew into a Grammy-winning artist who, alone among female singers, debuted four consecutive albums (which, together, sold 75 million copies) at No. 1. Today, however, she's become the undiluted essence of celebrity, and almost no one—not even Britney—seems much interested in her music. To promote her 2007 album *Blackout*, Britney did exactly one telephone interview, which lasted seven minutes. Disasters, not music, have become her product.

Steve Lunt, the A&R executive who steered her for most of her career, is baffled by the implosion. "It's very upsetting to see what's going on in her life," he says. "She was always driven and focused. The most quietly, deceptively ambitious person you could meet. But when you lose your focus, it's very hard to refocus." Haltingly, Lunt adds, "You don't know where this thing is going to go."

For now, it's off the rails. In the past 18 months, her transgressions, proven and alleged, have escalated beyond almost any in pop history. Next to Britney Spears, Courtney Love is Miss Manners. Since leaving her husband Kevin Federline in late 2006, she has flashed her vagina, shaved her head, physically attacked paparazzi and gone to rehab (twice). She has been charged with hit-and-run, effectively declared an unfit mother by the state of California and been fired by her lawyers (again, twice). She turned in the most disastrous performance of her career at MTV's Video Music Awards show, got dumped by her management firm and cleaned her hands of almost everyone who played any significant role in her first 25 years of life. She passes many days on what Ben Evansted, the paparazzo who took the most famous images of her genitals, calls "long drives to nowhere," punctuated by stops at gas stations, tanning salons, drug stores, pet stores and fast-food restaurants. In December, *OK!* magazine reportedly paid \$1 million for an interview with Britney's mother, Lynne, and her sister, Jamie Lynn, in which the 16-year-old announced she was pregnant. When paps asked Britney what she thought of the news, she inadvertently revealed the degree of her estrangement from her family: With a scowl and a giggle, she said, "My sister's not pregnant!"

If there was any remaining boundary between her public and private lives, it vanished just before Christmas, when she spent the night



SCENES FROM A FALL

1) On *The New Mickey Mouse Club*; 2) Before Justin Timberlake said bye bye; 3) Onstage in Miami, March 2004; 4) Getting acquainted with K-Fed on a hotel balcony; 5) Oops! Nearly dropping baby Sean Preston; 6) Catching a buzz at an L.A. salon, 2007; 7) With soon-to-spawn little sis, Jamie Lynn; 8) After stripping down at a Malibu beach, 2007; 9) With BFFs-for-a-week Lindsay and Paris; 10) With pal Sam Lutfi; 11) Classy, always classy; 12) With paparazzo paramour Adnan Ghalib; 13) Dazed and confused at the VMAs; 14) *Weekend at Gurney's*: en route to the hospital in January.

in a hotel with Adnan Ghalib, the alpha pap who works for a small agency called Finalpixx. Britney's self-created Stockholm syndrome, it seemed, was consummated. Then, when it looked like things could not possibly get worse, police were called to Britney's home when she refused to relinquish her two children after their scheduled visit on January 3. After a three-hour standoff, she was strapped to a gurney and taken by ambulance to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. The next day, she lost all visitation and custody rights to her kids.

Lindsay is a lightweight, Paris is a shoe-in for Junior League, compared to Britney. Her mess has become tragedy. Where did things go wrong? Many outsiders blame her problems on drug abuse, a theory given some weight when the judge in her custody battle wrote of her "habitual, frequent and continuous use of controlled substances and alcohol."

But in scores of interviews with her former friends and associates, a more complex account of her agonies takes shape. A business associate who helped her prepare for September's VMAs performance says, "There's obviously some substance-abuse issues going on... But even if, hypothetically, she was out the night before the VMAs doing blow and then took a Xanax to come down and then got drunk right before the show—even if she did that—even that wouldn't explain the performance. She wouldn't have done that if there weren't some self-sabotage going on." (Spears did not respond to interview requests from *Blender*.)

Britney once had an A-list team of publicists, managers, lawyers and handlers that rivaled any superstar's. Now she's essentially reduced that staff to one person: Sam Lutfi, a 33-year-old Hollywood gadabout with a questionable past, a couple of low-budget film credits as a producer and no apparent qualifications for his current position. A prominent former Spears adviser believes that Lutfi "has the potential to cause enormous problems, to sink her deeper in the hole and exploit her in a lasting way."

Like all child stars, Britney Spears has been exploited, with varying degrees of calculation, since her career began—so much so that it may be the kind of relationship in which she now feels most at home. "She got chewed up by this new celebrity culture and spat out, so it's hard not to feel some sympathy for her," says VH1 Executive Vice President Michael Hirschorn. "She really was turned into a lab rat." While her troubles include substance abuse, pressure from public scrutiny and a failure to understand that actions have consequences, many who've been close to her over the years agree that her most basic problem is something else. "This goes deeper," says Melinda Bell, a former member of her management team. "It has to do with something about love."

3. THE BREADWINNER

JAMIE SPEARS, A CONTRACTOR, AND HIS WIFE, LYNNE, A SCHOOL-teacher, were churchgoing people in the small town of Kentwood, Louisiana, when their daughter Britney was born. "They weren't stage parents," Steve Lunt says firmly. Yet from the time that 2-year-old Britney first asked to take dance lessons, her desire to perform has been the defining feature of her family's life. Jamie had a drinking problem during Britney's childhood (he's now sober), and construction projects sometimes took him from his family for extended periods. That may have made it easier for Britney and Lynne to choose the gypsy life; when Britney was 10, she moved to New York with her mother to become an off-Broadway baby. She was a runner-up on *Star Search* the next year, and a regular on *The New Mickey Mouse Club* the year after that.

By 17, Britney was her family's pillar of strength: Her record deal even saved her parents from bankruptcy. Lynne, as well as Britney's brother, Bryan, were both on the girl's payroll. "She was the breadwinner in her family," says one former manager. "And when you know everyone's living off you, you learn not to trust." Moreover, again like most child stars, "she was never really taught how to live. Basic things: how to balance a checkbook, how things get done."

Still, she made some very grown-up decisions, very early. Maybe

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

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1 "SHE HAS A TERRIBLE FARTING AND BURPING PROBLEM."

2 "MY INCONVENIENCE DIDN'T MATTER TO HER."

3 "BRITNEY HAD A BLANK FACE AND SHOWED LITTLE EMOTION WHATSOEVER."

4 "I HOPE SHE WILL DO THE RIGHT THING THE NEXT TIME SHE COMES HERE."

5 "BRITNEY WAS THE FIRST ONE TO UNDRESS, AND THEN EVERYONE ELSE FOLLOWED."

A KIM ROBARD-RIFKIN, the woman whose car Spears hit-and-run in a San Fernando parking lot

B ESTHER TOGNOZZI, co-owner of Esther's Haircutting Studio, the San Fernando salon where Spears shaved her head

C MATT ENCINIAS, the random 21-year-old Spears got naked with in a hot tub at the Standard Downtown hotel in L.A.

D JATINDER KAUR, owner of the Sherman Oaks Chevron gas station where Spears allegedly boosted a \$1.39 lighter

E TONY BARRETTO, a.k.a. Fat Tony, Spears's former bodyguard

ANSWERS: 1-E; 2-A; 3-B; 4-D; 5-C

the most grotesquely curious and controversial event of her early career was her rumored choice, at age 17, to undergo surgical breast enhancement. Speculation about the procedure triggered criticism and raised the question of whether she would actually make such an extreme, and extremely sexualizing, choice—or whether Britney Spears was being created as a sexual girl-golem by dirty old record execs. A publicist who knew her says the call was Britney's and that the singer gave a startlingly simple explanation for her surgery at the time: "I work like a woman, everyone treats me like a woman, but I look like a girl."

"If that's what she wanted, who would have told her no?" asks Eric Foster White, who produced or cowrote six songs on her first album, ... *Baby One More Time*. It sold 20 million copies worldwide, and Jive Records released the follow-up, *Oops! ... I Did It Again*, the next year. "You have to understand that there's nobody in the equation who stood to benefit by giving it to her straight," White says.

On her first concert tour, Britney cultivated little rituals of escape. She liked to read (*The Celestine Prophecy* was a favorite) and write in her prayer journal. Her other escape was a secret romance with Justin Timberlake, with whom she'd had a special connection since their *Mickey Mouse Club* days. Then the relationship became public, and its eventual end only aggravated the snowballing confusion of her public and private lives. In 2002, she was devastated by their breakup—even though, he said, it was her infidelity with choreographer Wade Robson that ended things. On a radio program, Timberlake talked about their sex life, and her image as a virgin was ruined. The breakup, according to those closest to Spears, began her personal collapse. "Ever since then," says one friend, "she's been mad at the world."

Her rebound got ugly: reported cocaine use, flings with bad boys Fred Durst and Colin Farrell, and snubbing fans at premieres

for her movie debut, *Crossroads*. (Despite the film's critical failure, Oscar-winning producer Brian Grazer wanted to meet with her; but Britney flaked on their breakfast appointment.)

That year, she also parted ways with her co-manager, teen-pop heavyweight Johnny Wright, whose creative vision had helped shape her image (her other longtime manager Larry Rudolph, a lawyer, was the deal-maker and helped with her personal life and finances). And then she crossed another fateful line, French-kissing Madonna at the 2003 VMAs. "I remember watching that," says one of her former handlers, "and thinking, *All it is now is sensation-ism*. Tweens and moms were appalled. The shock value wasn't worth it."

4. THE BRIDE

"FUNNY AS SHIT," SAYS A FORMER JIVE EXECUTIVE, WHEN ASKED what he thought of Spears's decision, one night in Las Vegas in 2004, to marry a childhood friend from Kentwood, Jason Alexander. "She doesn't connect the dots sometimes," he explains. "Everyone thinks you only do those things when you're drunk or you're high. Britney can do things like that stone-cold sober." The wedding was annulled 55 hours later, and Alexander gave a tabloid a sexually explicit account of their brief marriage.

Later that year, when Spears had a one-night stand with an LFO backup dancer named Kevin Federline (nicknamed Meat Pole for his manhood), "it turned into a three-day stand at the Beverly Hills Hotel," according to a Federline family friend. "All they did was have sex and order room service." Afterward, "he called his brother Chris, like, 'You're not going to believe whose back I broke,'" and, the friend says, bragged that they hadn't used condoms.

Britney invited Kevin to join her on a promotional tour in England, and though he didn't have a passport, one was quickly procured. On the flight home, they got engaged, and then she bought herself a \$50,000 engagement ring.

Britney's romance with Kevin also intensified her affair with the paparazzi. Two fantasies of love—with a man, and with the public—joined when she took Kevin to the beach one afternoon to show off her new boyfriend to the world. The number of photographers trailing Britney doubled after Kevin came on the scene, and the value of a premium shot of her climbed 500 percent.

She was rich and famous. He was, as she put it, "normal." She claimed to love this about him, but the discrepancy caused trouble from the start. Britney's solution? Equalize their status by starring together in a reality show. Against all advice, Britney insisted, and the result, UPN's *Britney & Kevin: Chaotic*, ran for five episodes.

"I knew it was bad for her," says a source who was involved in the deal. "But I thought, *Fuck it. I'll make a lot of dough*."

"*Chaotic* destroyed the image that we had worked so carefully to create," says one of her advisers at the time, who opposed the project. "She thought that if she showed the world everything, everyone would love her for it. What it did, instead, was make her look like white trash—and that is not what she is. She's better than that. It created an appetite for this wild and crazy girl and created this spiral where nothing can satisfy that appetite."

Chaotic, a withering mash of fart jokes, bull sessions and deadening sexual compulsiveness, was mostly filmed by Britney and Kevin with handheld cameras. It is porn without skin, reeking with the unacknowledged despair of people who have become things, even to themselves.

In a hotel room, Kevin asks, "How do you feel?"

Britney: "Great."

Kevin: "Why do you feel great?"

Britney: "The sex is great."

Kevin: "What else is great? Is it just the sex?"

Cut to an interview where Britney explains how she overcomes obstacles to intimacy with Kevin: "I'm not really good with just really being intimate one-on-one, and I think it helped me to have a camera there, instead of it just being me and him."

5. THE MOMMY

THE COUPLE HAD TWO CHILDREN (SEAN PRESTON, NOW 2, AND Jayden James, 1; Federline has two previous children, with actress Shar Jackson). "She had this fantasy of being a wife and mother, so everything happened fast," says one former handler, unsurprised that Britney and Kevin's relationship quickly circled the drain. Kevin told friends of wild mood swings and fights, calling her "bipolar"—eruptions sometimes triggered by the hours she spent jealously scouring the list of female "friends" on his MySpace page. Though sources close to the couple say Kevin was philandering and a bit of a freeloader, his experience with fatherhood made him the more domestic spouse. "He was Mr. Mom," changing diapers and rising early to cook breakfast, says a friend.

California child-welfare officials visited the couple's home after receiving reports of negligence, supported by paparazzi photographs and video. To set the record straight, Britney sat for a tearful *Dateline NBC* interview with Matt Lauer. She did her own hair and makeup, wore a cheap outfit, chewed gum throughout the conversation and talked about how much she enjoys house-keeping. She was trying to show the world she was a regular girl and that her recent maternal mishaps—nearly dropping Sean outside a hotel, letting him ride in her lap instead of strapped in a car seat—had been unfairly magnified by relentless public scrutiny. But the interview, a PR disaster, only made her look more disconnected from reality.

That fall, Britney called former manager Larry Rudolph to New York for a meeting. (The two had parted ways around the time of *Chaotic*.) When he showed up, she announced she was divorcing Federline and wanted to rehire Rudolph and get back to work. Despite her best intentions, though, her discipline had waned, and as Thanksgiving approached, she went on a hedonistic, labia-flashing tear through Hollywood clubland with her new buddy Paris Hilton.

Last Valentine's Day, an inner circle of family and friends gathered to persuade Britney to seek help for substance abuse, and she flew with Rudolph to a rehab facility in Antigua. The next day she checked out, returned to L.A., shaved her head, attacked a pap's car with an umbrella and spent five days going wild before voluntarily checking into Promises rehab center in Malibu. She stayed for only 30 days of the center's standard 45-day program and returned home in March.

She ended her rehabilitation early "because that would have required her to admit, in front of the world, that she had problems. That was the one thing she couldn't do," says one of Britney's closest companions during this time, sounding eaten by frustration. "Is there anyone on the planet, except for Britney Spears, who cannot see that Britney has a problem? After that, she pushed her family, literally everyone, away."

So, Britney was willing to let go of every intimate relationship she had, to avoid admitting to the abstract mass of "the public" that her life was a mess—even though everyone knew that her life was a mess?

"That would not be an unreasonable reading of the situation."

A June divorce ruling in accordance with Britney and Kevin's prenuptial agreement stipulated joint custody of the children. Federline's lawyer, Mark Vincent Kaplan, challenged the financial settlement, which was in accordance with the prenup: a lump sum rumored to be about \$1 million. In September, Britney agreed to give Kevin an extra \$20,000 per month for the rest of his life.

On the same day Britney made this concession, Kaplan filed a challenge to the custody agreement. The court quickly gathered testimony of Britney's odd behavior, ranging from classic Stupid Celebrity Shit (driving without a valid license) to hair-raisingly Freudian stories from a former bodyguard of "nudity by Ms. Spears, drug use and safety issues involving the children, post-rehab." Within weeks, L.A. County Superior Court Commissioner Scott Gordon temporarily suspended Britney's physical custody of the children. He ordered her to undergo random drug testing, mandated parenting classes for the couple, forbade them to >>

drink alcohol within 12 hours of assuming physical custody of the kids and gave a pathetically rudimentary list of guidelines about how to behave with their boys: "Each party is restrained from making derogatory remarks about the other party and the other party's family or significant other, either directly or indirectly, to the minor children, and from allowing anyone else to do so."

Here, the relationship between the California court and the kangaroo court of online gossip took a bizarre twist. The week before Commissioner Gordon suspended Britney's custody rights, he had decreed that the children "shall be transferred in a properly insured and registered vehicle, which shall be driven only by a properly insured driver who has a current and valid driver's license." Two days later, TMZ.com posted a photo of Britney, who had still not gotten a license, driving her children in Malibu.

The next day, Federline's lawyer convinced the judge to suspend custody rights.

This was not, by far, Spears's only violation of the court orders. She had blown off drug testing and parenting classes and had been seen drinking alcohol within 12 hours before picking up the

me things ... that the *TMZs* and the *Us Weeklys* of the world die for." Where Britney is concerned, Lutfi became X17's Deep Throat.

6. THE WINGMAN

WHEN SAM LUTFI MET BRITNEY LAST YEAR, THEY WERE BOTH going through transitions. She had begun distancing herself from all of her old intimates; he had been barred by a restraining order from contacting Danny Haines, a 29-year-old man from Orange County who had been his close friend.

There are at least two other outstanding restraining orders against Lutfi. Documents for both cases demonstrate his violent temper. This third case, however, raises deeper and more chilling questions about Lutfi's character, and about his relationship with Britney.

Danny Haines, who spoke exclusively with *Blender*, met Sam Lutfi on MySpace in the fall of 2005. Haines was at a low ebb when they met, he says. The bare outlines of his situation bear some resemblance to Britney's: His professional life was adrift, his relationships with old friends and family were in disrepair and he had some secrets that he didn't want anyone to know.

Lutfi was fun to be with. He claimed to be friends with celebrities from Kate Beckinsale to Roseanne Barr, and he seemed to know every nightclub bouncer in L.A. With Lutfi, Haines says, "it seemed like you could break all the rules."

Their fun was fueled by long, confessional conversations in which Haines described his unsatisfying, distant relationships with his family. Lutfi's account of his own background—he grew up in a tight-knit family in Woodland Hills, California, where his mother reportedly owns several gas stations—sounded ideal by comparison.

Haines says Lutfi wanted to know everything about him—every secret, every problem—and Haines complied. It seemed that nothing shocked Lutfi, even when Haines, who is straight, told him about some X-rated, homoerotic modeling he had done for a photographer he'd met online.

Haines remembers the night Lutfi offered to straighten out his life: "He said, 'I can help you. I can help your parents. But you need to be honest with me. If you're lying to me about anything, I'll know.'"

To Haines's fractured ego, Lutfi's social skills and emotional intelligence were magnetic. He encouraged Haines to "stand up for myself" and at the same time worked to become indispensable to him. Lutfi ingratiated himself with Haines's family, acting as a go-between and informal counselor.

Haines says their relationship was not romantic or sexual but that Lutfi was more jealous than a lover. He could be supportive one day and vicious the next, leaving voicemails tracing extremes from "You're a worthless motherfucker" to "I love you, man. I love you to death." He says that although Lutfi also made some feckless gestures toward an old-fashioned con job—Haines claims Lutfi borrowed about \$18,000 that he did not pay back, though Lutfi's mother finally settled much of the debt—Lutfi reserved most of his energy for emotional blackmail and extortion. "Everybody hates you," he wrote to Haines, suggesting that Haines should just kill himself: "Seriously, sleeping pills, LOTS of them ..." (Lutfi declined to comment for this story.)

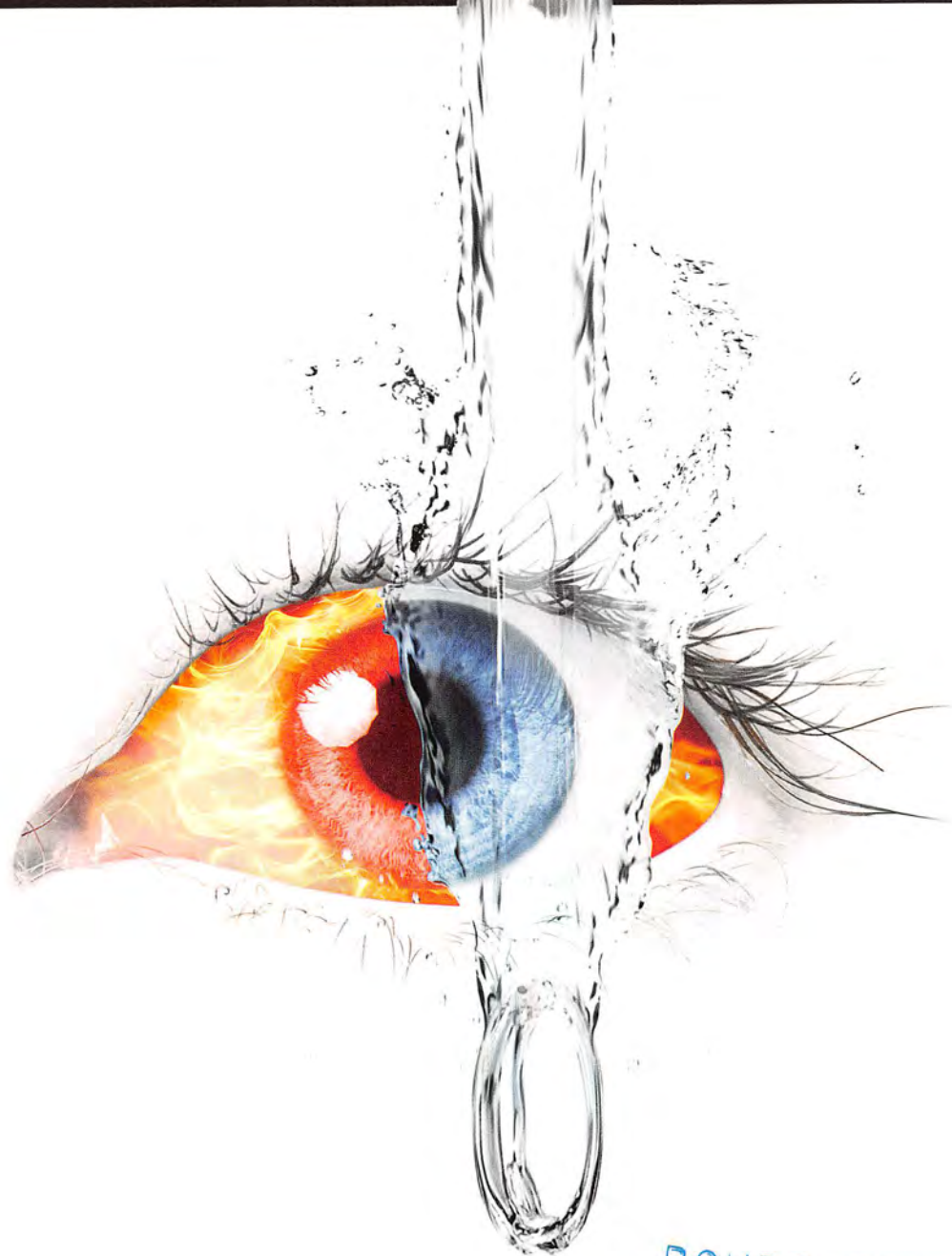
When Haines finally cut the cord, Lutfi humiliated him. He e-mailed naked photographs of Haines to his family, friends, colleagues and employer. Then he texted and called incessantly, telling Haines he hoped his sister would be "raped to death," >>

**"IS THERE ANYONE
ON THE PLANET,
EXCEPT FOR BRITNEY,
WHO CANNOT SEE
THAT BRITNEY HAS A
PROBLEM?"**

boys. (TMZ offered proof by posting video of her in a club.) But from this point on, the infinite feedback loop between her bad behavior and its coverage online was sealed. TMZ and X17online.com videos of Britney, taken in the months following her custody suspension, show her running stop signs and rolling over a pap's foot. She bumps another pap with her car, wincing, "sorry, sorry, sorry" in a baby voice; then, when she cannot figure out how to exit a parking garage, looks pleadingly to the paps and they come to her aid. They pump her gas, guide her through everyday confusion at a fast-food drive-through window and often pick up her tab. Not without reason, she seems to think there's no need to settle her own accounts. She plays the role they expect her to play. In a Van Nuys filling station, she picks up a \$1.39 Bic lighter and walks away with it, looking into the video cameras and saying, "I stole something! Oh, I'm bad. Ohhh!"

Of all the paparazzi agencies, X17 has emerged during the past year as the one with the closest relationship with Britney. Brandy Navarre, who owns X17 with her husband, François, tells a story of the day Britney went to a tanning salon and told her security man, "Get X17 for me." She goes into a private booth and she starts giving us this message she wants to put out to her fans. She affected this Valley-girl voice, and she basically told us that it was her mother and Larry Rudolph who forced her into rehab, but that she was never on drugs or alcohol. She knew we'd put it on the Web site unedited."

Navarre also brags that X17 scored the first interview with Sam Lutfi: "We were the first people to come out with his name and who he was." Navarre initially received tips from "funny pseudonyms," and then, "out of the blue," she says, "Sam started telling



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according to a court document. In an e-mail about Haines's mother ("that Mormon bitch"), Lutfi wrote, "I hope Satan devours her flesh and bones," and said he looked forward to the day when he would "piss on [her] burial."

Such communications moved Haines to seek the restraining order, which also protects his mother from being contacted by Lutfi. A few months later, Haines says that Lutfi called his brother-in-law to say he'd met a celebrity whom he wanted to set Haines up with. Later, Haines saw photographs of Lutfi with Spears in the tabloids. In those pictures, Lutfi was wearing a bodybuilding shirt and baseball cap that he had taken from Haines.

Haines, whose relationship with Lutfi was the subject of a few obscure blog comments after Lutfi's other restraining orders were reported in December, says he subsequently received an e-mail from Lutfi's sister's address, which he read as a warning: "One of your friends is writing to some magazines about your history with my brother ... I don't think that's wise for him to do." The warning came with what sounded like a threat: "Those pictures and your history isn't so positive either and I'm sure you wouldn't want that to be public as well."

**"PEOPLE SAY SHE NEEDS
TO GO TO REHAB.
I THINK SHE JUST NEEDS
A FRIEND."
—FORMER MANAGER JOHNNY WRIGHT**

Informed of the details of Haines's relationship with Lutfi, Jamie and Lynne Spears, who declined to discuss Lutfi on the record, both expressed grave concern to *Blender* about his ongoing involvement in their daughter's life. They encouraged Haines to go public with his story.

"If Sam's not doing anything wrong with Britney, if he's not worried about being exposed," Haines asks, "why would his sister be saying, *Don't talk about my brother and his past?*"

7. THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

BRITNEY SHOWED AT LEAST A GLIMMER OF SANITY WHEN, ON Saturday, January 5, she reportedly ignored "Dr. Phil" McGraw, the TV therapist who surprised her at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, then spoke about the visit to *Entertainment Tonight*. But even he would have been an improvement on Lutfi, who, Haines says, described himself as an "unlicensed counselor" in the court hearing that led to the restraining order.

The symbiosis between stars and sleazebags is as old as show business. The story rarely has a happy ending (see Anna Nicole Smith), and talent alone saves no one (see Judy Garland). Lutfi's personal history adds a frightening element to the unsavory task of forecasting Britney's fate.

For countless observers, Britney's latest unraveling brought that impulse to the surface. A Detroit radio station announced, then canceled, a "Britney Suicide-Watch" contest, inviting listeners to name the date for a \$1,000 prize. Just shy of grave-dancing, Perez Hilton gloated that his Web site received an all-time high

of more than 10 million hits on the day the star was hospitalized: "Thanks, Britney!"

Others voice what seem to be kinder thoughts. Just a few weeks before the January meltdown, Bonnie Fuller, chief editorial director of American Media Inc., which publishes *Star* magazine, told *Blender* that "everybody wants her to get better." Then, asked to name her best-selling Spears cover story, Fuller answered, "BRITNEY HITS ROCK BOTTOM was a big one," seemingly without irony.

"I think she's really lost most of her fans' sympathy," Fuller continued. "She's done the ultimate betrayal to her fans, by appearing to be a bad mother. That's something that even the most steadfast fan has a problem with. You always want to think that your idols are essentially good. They may be misunderstood or misguided, may have fallen victim to addictions that they can't control, but they're basically good people."

Britney became the tabloids' wet dream by making herself the very image of a bad person. More than that: the worst person. There is, it seems, no limit to the number of things you can hate her for. She's irresponsible, lazy, selfish, arrogant, stupid, tacky and so depraved as to look almost subhuman. (Paris Hilton nicknamed her "the animal.") She does not take care of herself, and still she could have sex with almost anyone she wants. She revels in her own violation and invites you to the orgy: "I can't control myself/They want more/Well, I'll give 'em more ..." she sings on *Blackout*.

After Britney's catatonic VMAs performance of "Gimme More," a short video called "Leave Britney Alone!" became a monster hit on YouTube. Chris Crocker, an androgynous actor from Tennessee, appeared on the verge of nervous breakdown, a lone voice crying out in her defense. It was a sequel to a video he had posted the previous week, "Back up, Britney haters!": "I don't just like Britney when she's glitzy ... I like Britney when she looks homeless. I like Britney when her hair extensions, her tracks are showing. I like Britney when her cootch is showing ... Because I love BRIT. NEY. OK? Not the persona. The *person*. I love Britney for real reasons. I love Britney for Britney."

Crocker, naturally, parlayed his YouTube fame into a deal for a reality show. There is no way of knowing how much of his screed was staged and how much was sincere. Yet the sentiment, like all fans' feelings about celebrities, requires one fundamental correction: Chris Crocker can't love the real Britney, because he does not know the real Britney.

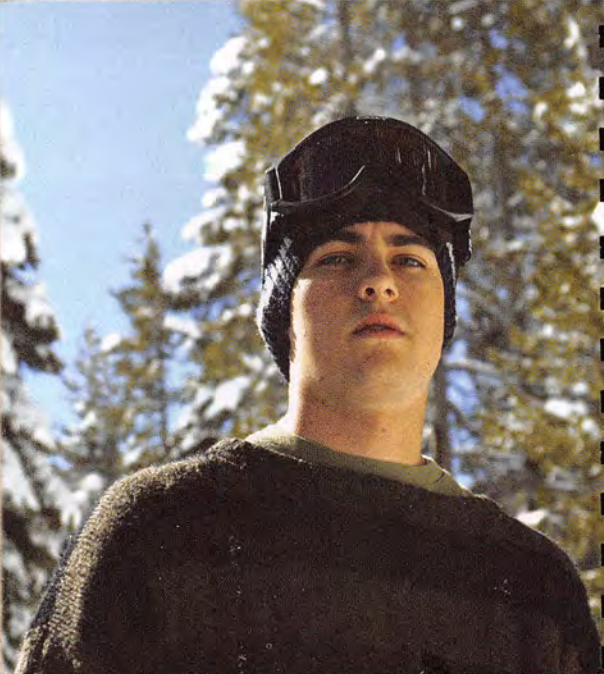
Yet even the people who do know the real Britney don't know her anymore. Her former manager Johnny Wright says, "I'm not pointing fingers, but I can't believe that she woke up one morning and said, 'I don't want my family, or anyone else I knew, to be in touch with me anymore.'"

"People say she needs to go to rehab. I think she just needs a friend—somebody not caught up in Hollywood, not looking for a paycheck. Somebody she trusts has to step up and break it down for her."

When Wright worked with her, Britney had a personal assistant named Felicia Culotta. "She was her friend first, and she worked for peanuts. She had no other agenda than Britney's well-being," Wright says.

Recently he told her, "Felicia, you need to reach out to her."

Culotta's answer was a measure of Britney's isolation, and a sign of her peril. She said, "Johnny, they won't let me in." [BLENDERS]



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Q&A

"Why, yes, we will
play connect the
dots with you ..."

NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

THIS SOULFUL BRITISH HITMAKER IS POP'S WHOLESOME GOOD GIRL. SO WHY IS SHE BRAGGING ABOUT HER POLE DANCING AND TELLING US WHERE TO FIND PHOTOS OF HER KNICKERS?

BY JODY ROSEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK SQUIRES

The English press has pegged you as a Goody Two-shoes. The title of your song "Size Matters" sounds promising—but it turns out to be about the size of a guy's heart. Tell the truth: Are you really such a good girl? I suppose I am, a bit. I was a late bloomer. I didn't have a boyfriend until I was 18. I don't take drugs or anything, so I guess that makes me a bit boring.

You're not exactly Amy Winehouse. Could you at least kick her ass in a street fight? In a fistfight? Easy. I mean, look at me. I'm an athlete!

Have you been pressured by your record company to be more sexed-up? Yeah, but I always fought it. I just wanted to be known for my music, not for, you know, being a great pole dancer. Even though I am.

Really? There's a pole right over there, you know. You'll just have to take my word for it.

Your hit "I Wanna Have Your Babies" was banned from a U.K. radio station out of concern that it might promote teen pregnancy. That's kind of gangsta. It's hilarious, because that song is tongue-in-cheek. It's about the fantasies you have on a first date. It's about not saying what's on your mind—you know, some girls start fantasizing about getting married and having kids right off the bat. And guys aren't any different—they aren't going to come right out and tell a girl what they're fantasizing about on the first date, because she'd probably just get up and leave. Or maybe she wouldn't—in which case you'd have a really memorable first date.

Do you get stalked by paparazzi? All the time! Some are nice, but lots of them just try to provoke you. Because that's what they want: a picture of you giving them the finger or beating them up. Or they'll stick the camera up your skirt. And the picture of your knickers—or no knickers—is going to be the most-printed picture of you ever. I was onstage once and the wind caught my skirt and it came up for, like, a split second. And that's probably the most-published picture of me. Get yourself to Google.

The tabloids once reported that you were dating Nick Lachey. True? That's because I was standing

in a picture with him! I was in New York, and no one had told me where the cool clubs were. And somehow Nick Lachey knew where they all were. So we went to the club. That's all.

You toured with Justin Timberlake and recorded a song with Adam Levine. Are you sure you never made out with either of them? They wish.

Who's your most famous fan? Well, Prince knows who I am. We sang together, actually, at a party at his house in L.A. His house is amazing. It has a purple elevator.

You've got a very big, soulful tone in your singing voice. It's not what you would expect to hear coming from a drug-free Breck girl. When I'm in the studio, staying up late writing and recording, I half-lose my voice. And it sounds great. I think personality in singing is the most important thing. I did grow up in that kind of soul scene, and I do love those Whitney Houston kind of vocal runs or whatever. But I'd always sacrifice a really good run for feeling. With so many singers today, all they do are those runs. I'm like, *Please, you don't even understand what you're singing!*

You grew up in London. But your parents are from New Zealand, right? Yeah, and my family still has that Kiwi culture. We call it "Bri-Wi."

So can you drop into a Kiwi accent? Yes, a little bit.

Say the words "Bret" and "Jemaine" for us. Oooh, *Flight of the Conchords*! I love that show! I really want to guest-star on it. Or at least cover one of the songs. [Sings] "It's business, it's business time!" [BLENDER]

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FROM A
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LIST 2008

FROM A PSYCHO RAPPER TO A SWEATY DANCE PARTY TO ONE MIND-BOGGLING SET OF ABS, **BLENDER** PRESENTS 32 PARAGONS OF SUPREME ROCK ACHIEVEMENT. ILLUSTRATIONS BY NATHAN FOX.



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BY ANDREW BEAUJON, TOM CONLON,
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JOSH EELLS, RUSS HELLER, CRAIG MARKS,
JODY ROSEN, ROB TANNENBAUM AND MARK YARM

BEST ROCK STAR ALIVE



Whoa, man, take it easy!

HE'S HIP-HOP'S RESIDENT WORD-TWISTING, PILL-POPPING, GUNSLINGING GENIUS. BUT IS HE

LIL WAYNE



There, that's better.

TOO CRAZY FOR HIS OWN GOOD? **BY JONAH WEINER** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL EDWARDS

MUSIC

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, please rise for the Greatest Rapper on Earth. He is two hours late, which is on the early side by his clock. He's five-feet-six, which is perhaps shorter than you were expecting, but it's a magisterial, Yoda kind of short. He carries a Styrofoam cup thick with a woozy-making purple potion. He drifts around the room like a good smell, receiving the faithful (in this case, his entourage) with a lazy handshake. He carries himself like some well-fed, opium-eating pasha: regal, radiating satisfaction, really stoned. And when he greets *Blender*, it isn't a hello so much as a benediction: We say, "Hey, man," and he responds, as though setting mortal eyes upon him is enough to defy credulity, "Believe."

We knew this about him: Lil Wayne is seriously into Lil Wayne. "Don't I look fresh?" he asks the gathered at Atlanta's Hot Beats Recording Studios. We nod. His look is skater-fabulous: fitted black sweatshirt, diamonds everywhere, multicolored Nike Uptowns. His dreadlocks are gathered nonchalantly into a rubber band, and a red bandana plumes from his back-right jeans pocket: a gangbanger's flag doubling as a dandy's flourish. "Look at me," he says. "You could *bury* me looking like this."

It's 9 P.M. and Wayne is checking in for a night of work. His cup brims with Hawaiian Punch and promethazine codeine cough syrup; he drinks the stuff constantly—for pleasure, for the chronic head-and-chest colds that have given his voice its signature Speak & Spell croak and because he can't stop. "If I go off it," he explains, "I go into withdrawal."

Since early 2005—even before Hurricane Katrina sneezed Wayne's hometown of New Orleans into near oblivion—the rapper, 25, has split his time between Miami, Atlanta and his tour bus. He's here this December evening to work on songs for his sixth studio album, *The Carter III*, which should be hip-hop's biggest release of 2008, anticipated by gangsta-rap obsessives, blog dorks, the music industry and his peers alike (Kanye West, Jay-Z and T.I. are all on-the-record Weezy appreciators).

He instructs his engineer, Darius "Deezle" Harrison, to fire up a new song; as soon as he hears his own music, Wayne grows wild, his slow-mo confidence shoved abruptly aside by a raging, theatrical egotism. The track is called "Dinnertime," in which Wayne compares other rappers to food and then eats them, chewing noises included. Faced with his prodigious skills, he stutter-steps around the room, headbanging with increasing violence. "I'm too sick," he says, revving himself up. "Too sick! I don't even wanna listen to my own shit, 'cause it makes me want to kill somebody!" The moment the song ends, Wayne bellows at no one in particular, "Fuck yo' favorite rapper!" He tells Deezle to dial up another track and reiterates his point, stomping his Nikes to emphasize each syllable: "FUCK! YO'! FAV! OR! ITE! RAP! PER!"

Lil Wayne's self-regard is so high, his urge to prove his bestness so total, that trying to communicate this, he can exceed propriety and, often, logic itself. That's when he says things like, "I'm better than Jay-Z" or "I will annihilate your favorite rapper—even if it's me" or "I'm a Martian, and if you understand me, then you're Jesus Christ."

Tonight he announces, "Fuck it, I'm not even a rapper. I'm past that." Dramatic pause. "I'm an R&B singer now." Then he plays us "Staring at the World," in which he serenades a crush through a vocoder: E.T. meets T-Pain. "Call me T-Wayne," he says. "I have an album coming out called *Luv Sawgz*. It's me being more creative, more talented, more than hip-hop."

If anyone can back up this sort of bravado right now, it's Lil Wayne. For the past two years—a span in which Wayne has produced two official albums, a half-dozen mix tapes and 60-plus guest

verses—he's been upending everything we know about gangsta rap. In his songs, he'll threaten bloody murder one moment, shout out *Harry and the Hendersons* the next. He's as comfortable rapping alongside Jay-Z as he is Enrique Iglesias. Gangsta orthodoxy says you can't turn a ho into a housewife, so Wayne releases "Prostitute," about settling down with a card-carrying skank; gangsta orthodoxy says don't get high on your own supply, so he releases "I Feel Like Dying," an eerie transmission from the outer reaches of one wiggled-out codeine binge. And when a photo surfaced last year of Wayne kissing his mentor, the rapper Bryan "Baby" Williams, there were no disavowals and denials. Instead, Wayne bragged about it. "Every nigga talking shit about me?" he declares. "All of they bitches would love to kiss me right now."

Forget partying like a rock star: Wayne lives, breathes, eats pills and sleeps around like one. He plays electric guitar onstage and wears bling festooned with skulls; he's blissfully allergic to be-nice/act-nice media training; he's been arrested on narcotics charges so often it's a wonder Kate Moss hasn't come crawling; he's pushed drug rap to a hallucinatory, existential extreme Jim Morrison would envy; and he oozes a dangerous, polyamorous, borderline-polymorphous sexuality.

"I don't disguise anything about myself," he says. "If there's rules in hip-hop, take me out of that motherfucker."

HE WAS BORN Dwayne Carter in New Orleans's Hollygrove neighborhood. His bedroom was spare: no posters on the wall, no action figures ("I wasn't into that toy shit"), just a calendar, a Nintendo, a bunk bed. No siblings, though: He just decided he wanted a bunk bed, and his mother, Cita, a chef who'd become pregnant with Wayne at 19, indulged him. "I did perfect at school, so at home I was king," Wayne explains. We're on a couch at Hot Beats, and a very cute girl named China (girlfriend? *Atlanta* girlfriend? She's certainly not Taya Johnson, with whom Wayne had a daughter at 14, nor the rapper Trina, to whom he's been linked, nor the actress Lauren London, to whom he was briefly engaged) sits quietly beside him, tracing spirals on his back as he talks.

Wayne's childhood is hard to figure. On one hand, he was a bookish overachiever, enrolled in the gifted program at Lafayette Elementary. In middle school, he joined the drama club—you can YouTube him playing the Tin Man in *The Wiz*. He'd gotten his taste for performance at age 8, rapping on his front porch. "I had a crew called K.W.A.—Kids With Attitude," he recalls. "Neighborhood girls would be the audience, and I always wound up getting booty"—bump-and-grind dancing, that is—"in the back yard after. That was encouraging."

On the other hand, he was, in his words, "a young G." Wayne hardly knew his biological father, and by the time he turned 11, Cita had taken up with a drug dealer nicknamed Rabbit. "That was when I found out about all the things I shouldn't have," Wayne says. He started carrying a .32 Dillinger, loaded with bullets he'd purchased at 25 cents apiece from a neighbor. He'd bring his pistol to school and stow it in his "gifted desk." Cortez Bryant, Wayne's friend since junior high and now his manager, recalls that "at school, he could be as brainy as he wanted to be, but when that bell rang, he was back out in the jungle."

A couple of years later, Wayne's mother bought him his first Glock. "My mama's a gangsta," he says. "She told me every day, 'Nigga play with you, you kill him.' I believed her, and I do everything she say." He stands up, agitated, and points at four teardrops tattooed on his face—these marks traditionally signify lives their bearer has snuffed out. "You see these four," he says. "Lord, forgive me. But guess what, you play with me, I'll knock your head open and piss on your motherfucking eyes."

Talk about a paradox. The Tin Man? Toting a Glock? But when Wayne signed with local label Cash Money as a tween, he realized that rapping offered a perfect way to reconcile his middle-school-musical side with his eyeball-pissing mean streak. He dropped out

Lil Wayne and the hardest-working air freshener on the planet.



of school at 14, and a year later Wayne was touring the globe.

There is one shooting victim Wayne will discuss: himself. He was 12, in his bedroom, wielding a hamburger and a .44, staging his own little *Taxi Driver* “You talking to me?” scene. “I was watching a Biggie video in the mirror, so I could see myself with the gun. Like, ‘Yeah, nigga! What, nigga?’ Stupid.” The trigger slipped, and a bullet missed Wayne’s heart by two inches.

In these sorts of tales, he comes off like rap’s Chuck Norris—when Lil Wayne falls in water, he doesn’t get wet; water gets Lil Wayne. *How bad were you hurt?* “I was a young G,” he says, brushing his shoulder for effect. “It was all good.” Ditto the other time he survived a bullet: On his tour bus after a show in Florida in 2001, his friend refused to let some groupies aboard. The girls got pissed and fired two shots through the window. One struck Wayne in the chest. “It didn’t go all the way in, ‘cause the window slowed it down,” he explains. “We pulled that motherfucker out, dropped it on the sofa, full of blood.” Chuck Norris can’t resist a punch line. “I was like, ‘Damn! Them bitches wanted to fuck bad!’”

HIP-HOP IS home to many unsolved mysteries. Who killed Biggie? Who invented the remix? Who bought Kevin Federline’s album? And: How did Lil Wayne get so damn good? How did he go from competent, pint-size novelty to rap’s reigning simile-twister, brag-crafter and joke-lander—not to mention, on the smoldering “Georgia ... Bush,” its most eloquent post-Katrina spokesman? “I don’t know, man,” his friend T.I. says. “All I can say is, he’s been doing his push-ups.”

Part of it is his voice—how it grew from adolescent wheedle to something brittle but sonorous, warm but alien. Part of it is age—not all child stars need go out in a blaze of rehab and crotch shots come adulthood. And part of it is mix tapes. Typically, these

unofficial releases are repositories for ideas MCs deem too “street” or out-there for label release. Since 2002’s *10,000 Bars*, Wayne has released mix tapes compulsively, filling them with left-field boasts and surrealist doodles; now, if he wants to compare competitors to tuna casserole, he just does it. “Wayne always had strange ideas,” Bryant explains. “But mix tapes gave him an outlet.”

That unhinged genius has only increased the pressure on him to deliver a great, bottom-line-affecting, official CD. The question, though, is whether or not Wayne’s wildness is its own liability. *Tha Carter III* has already been bumped several times, and you can almost hear Wayne’s label execs wondering whether he’s spread himself too thin, or whether rap’s finest free-associator can deliver a cohesive, capital-A album. But do you think he cares? “Album, mix tape—” he scoffs “—when I’m behind that mic, I don’t give a fuck. I have too much fun in the booth.”

Around midnight, Wayne has some fun in the booth. He decides to record the final verse for a song called “Dr. Carter.” As a dusty funk groove loops, Wayne paces, checking his two-way. He hasn’t written out a rhyme in five years, but he’s always punching notes into his phone. After several minutes, he steps to the mic: “Swagger tighter than a yeast infection,” he begins. “Fly, go hard like geese erection.” The room cracks up. “Play that back,” Wayne says. He consults his two-way. Listens to the couplet. Returns to the mic. Goes through 16 bars like this, adding lines incrementally, tweaking his cadence, perfecting his phrasing, thinking up rhymes as he goes. The final product sounds exhilaratingly ad hoc and disjointed, like a rapped exquisite corpse.

Finally, he emerges, Styrofoam cup and glowing blunt in hand. It’s 1 A.M. and his eyelids are so low he looks like he’s sleepwalking. He listens to the playback and smiles.

“Hear that?” he says. “Fuck yo’ favorite rapper.” [BLENDER]



BEST TV SHOW YOU'RE NOT WATCHING

ROB & BIG

▶ **ROB DYRDEK** IS a stoner-mellow professional skateboarder with a prankish streak a mile wide. Chris "Big Black" Boykin is a six-foot-six, 375-pound bodyguard and former "male stripper." Together they're the stars of MTV's best reality show *not* featuring, like, a total bitch. (Season three premiered last month, and a DVD containing the first two seasons is out now.) They spread mirth in and around Rob's swank Hollywood Hills pad, and their freewheeling, dude-did-you-see-that? rapport is buddy-comedy gold. The show's producers aren't above milking ample laughs from Big's ample frame, either. Most episodes feature a yuk-yuk encounter between him and a small object (or, in one case, a miniature horse creatively nicknamed Mini-Horse), offering proof that some of the best reality shows are the ones constructed most like sitcoms.

And, yes, it's about a black dude in a white dude's employ, but this isn't *Driving Miss Daisy*. These guys radiate brotherly love—the opening song is Harry Nilsson's "Best Friend"—and the show presents them on basically equal footing, even if Big's feet weigh as much as Rob soaking wet. Case in point: Hit MTV.com's on-demand archive for the one where Rob kindly shaves Big's back before a party. (Ew.) And we haven't even mentioned Meaty, the skateboarding bulldog the duo picked up in Arizona and took home via private jet. He's TV's best straight man since Ed McMahon.

■ **BEST WRITER-PRODUCER YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF**

RYAN TEDDER

Quick, turn on the radio—chances are, there's a Ryan Tedder song playing right now. The 28-year-old singer-songwriter-producer has been dominating airwaves for months: "Apologize," the debut single by his band OneRepublic, recently broke a record for U.S. Top 40 airplay, and "Bleeding Love," which he cowrote and produced for British singer Leona Lewis, topped the U.K. charts for seven weeks straight. He's also helped pen hits for Jennifer Lopez ("Do It Well"), Natasha Bedingfield ("Love Like This") and Blake Lewis ("Break Another").

Tedder grew up in Oklahoma in a family of Pentecostal missionaries. "If the church doors were open, we were there," he says. Secular music was strictly off-limits: When he wanted to listen to, say, his *Naughty by Nature* tape, he had to convince his mom it was Christian rap. ("I told her 'O.P.P.' stood for Other People's Prayers.") Tedder's biggest hits still sound like exquisitely Pro Tool hymns, borne aloft by organs, strings and themes of sacrifice and loss. "A great melody lasts forever," he says. "Ten years from now you're still going to be hearing 'With or Without You' or 'I Don't Want to Miss a Thing.' You're not gonna be hearing Soulja Boy. I want my songs to be timeless."

■ **BEST REASON NOT TO HATE CHRISTIAN ROCK**

DAVID CROWDER BAND

Recently, the David Crowder Band toured nightclubs to celebrate the release of its new album, *Remedy*. That's remarkable only because Crowder makes "worship music," a syrupy alternative for people who think Christian rock is too edgy. But by incorporating influences from electronica to jam bands, the Waco, Texas, group has done more than just drag tight-assed Evangelicals into bars; they've helped bridge the gap between Evangelicals and secular culture. Along the way, Crowder has sold more than a million records and recorded with Ted Nugent, who says he was "moved" by the band. Was Crowder concerned about losing the author of "Wang Dang Sweet Poontang" on the Christian-rock world? He was, says Nugent, "and my response was, 'Who the hell do you think made the wang dang, you dumb fuck? I'm celebrating God's greatest works!'"

■ **BEST SONG TO KARAOKE**

"LIVIN' ON A PRAYER"

By Moby, whose upcoming CD, *Last Night*, can be sung along to at finer karaoke bars everywhere

"I'm not a very good singer, so I tend to go for the rousing group song. Bon Jovi's 'Livin' on a Prayer' is the most fun—everyone knows every word of it, and the moment it comes on, the room feels like a 7-Eleven parking lot in 1988. You just can't go wrong with an '80s metal song."

BEST

LIST

MUSIC

Is that a hood ornament between his legs or is Father Yod just happy to see us?



BEST DOLL FOR UNDER \$300 THE GHOSTFACE KILLAH DOLL

Tiny silk robe? Check. Tiny Wallabees? Check. Bona-fide 14-karat-gold eagle wristband and dinner-plate medallion? Double check! This nine-inch-tall toy, created by 4Cast Limited, is nothing if not faithful to its namesake: It even raps! Produced in an ultra-limited run, the doll sports a dorks-only price tag of \$299. But while that may sound steep compared to most action figures, let's see Tickle Me Elmo rhyme "shot up in 'em deadly venom."

BEST VIDEO GAME FOR HESHERS BRÜTAL LEGEND

If Tenacious D designed a video game, it would look like the awesome and ridiculous brawler *Brütal Legend*, due out later this year. In fact, the D's Jack Black voices our hero, a roadie who gets transported to a Nordic fantasy world—courtesy of a belt buckle "forged from the steel flesh of the fire beast"—where he must smite legions of demons and other foes with his trusty battle ax and a guitar capable of (literally) face-melting solos. And the game's got metal cred to spare: Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister, Judas Priest's Rob Halford and Ronnie James Dio provide additional voices, and Priest, Dio, Zakk Wylde, Black Sabbath, Kiss and Wolfmother soundtrack the mayhem.

BEST CONFESSION FROM A RECENT TELL-ALL RONNIE WOOD'S RONNIE

"With the drug scene happening all around them, our children couldn't help but notice. [Wood's son] Jamie used to come downstairs in the morning, and if there were joint ends in an ashtray, he'd nick them ... Once Jamie noticed someone on the sofa, thought the man looked familiar and stared until he recognized Christopher Reeve, who was out of his brain. He came running back to us, crying, 'You destroyed Superman!'"

BEST CULT GENIUS YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

FATHER YOD

▶ HIS EARTHLY NAME was James Baker. He came from Cincinnati to L.A. after World War II, and he went way native, picking up Eastern mysticism and gathering a group of far-seeing, freethinking, sexually daring young people who called him Father Yod and then, by the early '70s, YaHoWha. Together the master, his 14 "spiritual wives" and his followers ran the Source, a popular Hollywood health-food restaurant frequented by John Lennon and Bob Dylan. They lived in a mansion and helped to psychedelicize the Sunset Strip scene.

Soon thereafter, drug-damaged singer Sky Saxon, once the leader of the grungy Strip band the Seeds, fell in with the YaHoWha family, and they added guitars to the Tantric sex. With Yod as their frontman, the band—named the YaHoWha 13—recorded dozens of homemade albums of lysergic free-form chaos coveted today by collectors and the freak-folk legions they inspired. Devendra Banhart says Saxon gave him a secret family name as a teenager. Becky Stark of the indie folk-rock quartet Lavender Diamond is a fan; rumor has it the beatific mega-mogul Rick Rubin is as well. The singer for the Oakland, California, metal band Saviours even has a YaHoWha 13 tattoo on his leg.

Yod perished in 1975, in a manner befitting that decade: He went hang gliding off Oahu. He had never tried the sport before but felt his instincts would hold him up. The winds changed direction and he plunged to his death. His Family, however, lives on; members recently regrouped and played on the West Coast, and their tale of sects, drugs and rock & roll is chronicled in a fab new book called *The Source: The Untold Story of Father Yod, YaHoWha 13 and the Source Family*. According to Paz Lenchantin, the bassist for L.A. psych-weirdos the Entrance Band, the Family "are very special beings, and it comes out in their music." What is their message? "Words make our path stronger in unison." Say Wha?





BEST WORST GUITARIST

ST. SANDERS

▶ **SANTERI OJALA** HAS been playing guitar well for 15 years—and playing terribly for 10 months. Ojala, a 32-year-old Finnish artist, is the mastermind behind the YouTube-based *Shreds* series. Under the moniker St. Sanders, he takes videos of venerated guitar gods, re-dubs the sound with his own mangled, comically underwhelming playing, adds in some conspicuously fake audience applause and uploads the results (standouts include “Eddie Van Halen Shreds,” “Iron Maiden Shreds” and “Carlos Santana Shreds”). The videos pay hilarious homage to fret-tickling pomposity and deflate it at the same time.

Ojala stresses that he isn’t just making fun—he’s a fan. “It started when I was watching a Steve Vai video with the sound off,” he tells *Blender*. “I grabbed my guitar and played what Steve looked like he was playing, only poorly.” As a poor player, though, Ojala is downright virtuosic, precisely synching missed notes and garbled arpeggios (and the occasional Europe riff) with the movements onscreen. “Everyone makes fun of drummers, but nobody mocks guitarists,” he explains. “I figured it was time.”

■ BEST RADIO SHOW

THE LOON IN THE AFTERNOON

Vomiting on your boss isn’t a good move. But last fall, at a concert, Mojo Nixon tossed down a quadruple gin and tonic, which soon volcano’d up and onto an executive from Sirius Satellite Radio, where Nixon works. The boss didn’t mind, Nixon says—his vomit was a warm burst of authenticity: “I’m selling chaos, anarchy. You don’t know what the motherfucker is gonna say next.”

Satellite radio promised deliverance from the 100-year decline of terrestrial radio. Too bad most shows are as dull as CB radio. One great exception is Nixon’s *The Loon in the Afternoon*, on the Outlaw Country channel, weekdays from 4 to 8 P.M. EST. “In my opinion, there’s only three kinds of songs,” Nixon says. “Drinkin’ songs, fuckin’ songs and killin’ songs. The music we play has a baaaad attitude.”

Nixon (his birth certificate reads Neill Kirby McMillan Jr.) takes an unhinged delight in crazy-eyed music, expertly mixing eras (from Marshall Tucker Band to Big & Rich to Johnny Cash) and exhumes the forgotten. He also plays Mojo Nixon songs. In the ‘80s, he recorded outrageous novelty tracks, attacking Michael J. Fox or the antidrug movement—“Elvis Is Everywhere,” “Don Henley Must Die.” “The one I’m most proud of is ‘Tie My Pecker to My Leg,’” he crows. “It kind of gets stuck in your head. Virgins will be vacuuming, singing, ‘Gonna tie my pecker to my leg, to my leg.’”

So what qualifies this filthy, 50-year-old father as a radio host? “Well,” he says, “I’m completely full of shit.” He laughs like a ‘73 Buick LeSabre that won’t turn over. “I don’t have a lot of talent, but I’m entertaining. And I love this music.”

■ BEST LAWYER TO CALL WHEN YOU GET PINCHED

GERALD SHARGEL

By Irv Gotti, CEO of record label *The Inc* and a free man, thanks to Shargel, who won acquittals in 2005 for Irv and his brother on federal money-laundering charges

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a hip-hop guy, a Mafia guy or some corporate guy, Gerry is the best lawyer in the world. He had the courtroom in the palm of his hand; he had the jury members and the judge laughing, and he tore the government’s witnesses apart. It was like Johnnie Cochran at the O.J. trial. He’s a wizard with the law, and he’s such a likable person. After we were acquitted, some rich friends of mine took us out on their yacht to celebrate, and Shargel is there, drinking with all of my guys from the hood! Shargel’s with the hood guys, drinking, smoking, laughing and joking. They loved him. Yo, they loved him!”

■ BEST MUSIC-AWARDS SHOW

THE CMA AWARDS

Forget the Grammys and the VMAs; the hottest music-awards show is the Country Music Association’s annual shindig, an ideal mix of teary acceptance speeches, eye-popping fashion don’ts and ass-whuppin’ live playing. Old-fashioned entertainment values trump all at the CMAs—check YouTube for 2007’s Vocal Duo of the Year, Sugarland, flooring the crowd with a shiver-inducing acoustic version of their hit “Stay.” Tune in early for the red-carpet arrivals—a pageant of suitcase-size Stetsons, rhinestone-studded evening gowns and enough snakeskin to reupholster all 4,000 seats of the Grand Ole Opry.

Ever tried sliding
down a
bobsled run naked?



Ever tried  Gum?
Stimulate Your Senses



Knock it off,
Kid Sister, our
mom gave
us this sweater!

HIPSTER HOP

▶ Mikey Rocks wrote his first rap when he was 9 years old. "I was a real homebody," he says. "I'd stay in, play video games and watch cartoons. So, when I started writing rhymes, they were about three things: girls, video games and ninjas. The thing is, I've stuck to the same stuff ever since."

Mikey, 20, is one half of the Chicago rap duo the Cool Kids, and while he's only partly serious—to date, the group's catalogue includes no rhymes about nunchucks or Power Gloves—he and his partner, Chuck Inglish, 23, aren't afraid to get their geek on. They wear pastel windbreakers, thick-rimmed glasses and giant high-tops. Their breakout single, "Black Mags," is an ode to BMX customization that features a *MacGyver* reference and lines about killing time before class. "I love Young Jeezy," Chuck says. "His first album is the dopest thing ever. But for a stretch, it seemed like you needed 'drug dealing' on your résumé if you wanted to be a rapper. Hip-hop started off as party music. When did it become about standing on a corner with a bunch of dudes, looking pissed off?"

Recently, a loose confederation of MCs—spread out among Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York and Chicago—has been posing versions of that same question, and finding a widening fan base (one that includes Björk and M.I.A., who have taken some of them on tour, and Kanye West) in the process. Besides the Cool Kids, there's Kid Sister, 27, a Chicago MC who raps about pedicures over frenetic electronic dance beats; in Baltimore, the duo Spank Rock put a hyper-lewd, off-kilter spin on their city's homegrown "club" scene, while the teenage Rye Rye offers a sassy, PG-rated version; and in Brooklyn there's Santogold, a girl who sorta sings, sorta raps over dazzling, vertiginous digital hodgepodes: Her "Creator," coproduced by

BORED BY SURLY MAINSTREAM RAP, A FELLOWSHIP OF NERDS HAS CREATED A DANCEABLE, DAY-GLO ALTERNATIVE

BY JONAH WEINER // PHOTOGRAPH BY SASHA EISENMAN

BEST

BEST RAP BOOMLET

LIST

MUSIC

M.I.A. collaborator Switch, was one of 2007's strangest gems. These rappers frequently share stages, producers and color palettes (awesomely hideous Day-Glo), and all share a similar notion of what a rapper should be: a fun-loving, party-rocking, what-planet-did-you-come-from? weirdo.

Many of these MCs come from middle-class, culturally mixed backgrounds. "My mom's white, my dad's black and I grew up listening to stuff from each of those cultures," Kid Sister (born Melissa Young) says. "My grandmother took me to a Baptist church that sang gospel. My mom played classical clarinet. My father played drums in a Talking Heads cover band. My cousins gave me Biggie mix tapes. And I played Yente in *Fiddler on the Roof*. That's who I am." In high school, both Cool Kids recall hanging out with blacks and whites, computer nerds and football jocks, and suggest that this influenced their music as much as anything. "I was cool with everyone," Mikey says. "And that's how our music is."

Distributing singles via MySpace (where the Cool Kids originally met), connoisseur MP3 blogs and small labels like Fool's Gold and Mad Decent, these artists have produced the most exciting sounds to emerge from hip-hop's indie circuit in years. To listen to Rye Rye's "Shake It to the Ground," which rides a charmingly lo-fi pound of Baltimore club, or Kid Sister's "Pro Nails," a hyperactive cuticle-maintenance jam, is to hear music at once a million miles away from mainstream hip-hop and thoroughly enamored with it. When Kanye West first heard "Pro Nails"—West's

DJ, A-Trak, produced it, dates Kid Sister and co-owns Fool's Gold—he decided to record a rhyme for it. "One day," Kid Sister remembers, "A-Trak called up and played me Kanye's verse. I dropped to my knees, did the pee-pee dance—it was a dream come true!" For their part, the Cool Kids favor a spare production style—drum machines and buzzing synths—that suits their futurist nostalgia: They wear gold dookie ropes, but their breezy rapping is wholly contemporary. "I don't wanna be retro," Chuck says. "That's novelty. But when hip-hop first came out, the MC was just a dude with a mic who kept everybody in it, and I like that: just marrying your voice to the beat."

So far, this music has attracted an audience that, for the most part, doesn't look much like the kids who show up to cheer on *106 & Park*. "It's more white kids than black kids at our concerts, for sure," Mikey says. One reason for this, he notes, is that white fans "picked up on us first." Chuck says it also has to do with hip-hop provincialism. "People will complain, 'That's not hip-hop,'" he says, adding that an artist like Kanye has done much to challenge that kind of attitude: "He's got people in hip-hop clubs dancing to Daft Punk!" Kid Sister is understandably ambivalent about being pegged a hipster act. "Hipsters come out to the shows," she says. "But I hate being called a hipster. I go shopping at Target with my homegirls. I hang out at the Cracker Barrel. I prefer the term 'ghetto nerd.'" [BLANDIER]

BEST HEAVY METAL DRUMMER

MIDNIGHT SACRIFICES, EVIL ENCHANTMENTS, COWBELL ATTACKS—IT'S ALL FAIR GAME IN THIS BATTLE TO DETERMINE THE MIGHTIEST METAL DRUMMER ALIVE
BY AARON BURGESS

BEST
LIST
MUSIC

Danny Carey is a former session drummer (Carole King?!), and longtime occultist who reportedly takes song-writing cues from a demon he summoned. Be afraid.

Gene Hoglan is nicknamed the Atomic Clock for his ability to nail impossible rhythms at mind-melting BPMs. Too bad his opponent is the devil.

Brann Dailor praises Genesis drummer Phil Collins as the inspiration for Mastodon's weird rhythms. He also wore a suit to the Grammys—not very metal.

Swede Tomas Haake's rhythms are so notoriously difficult, it sounds like he's sampling himself eight times over—a feat he actually did once, just for kicks.

Tim Yeung has two of metal's fastest feet, clocking 872 beats in 60 seconds at a 2006 competition. And his upper limbs aren't slouches, either.

Fast footwork is one thing, and no metal drummer gets props without it, but Canadian Flo Mounier also brings a jazz cat's sense of swing and nuance.

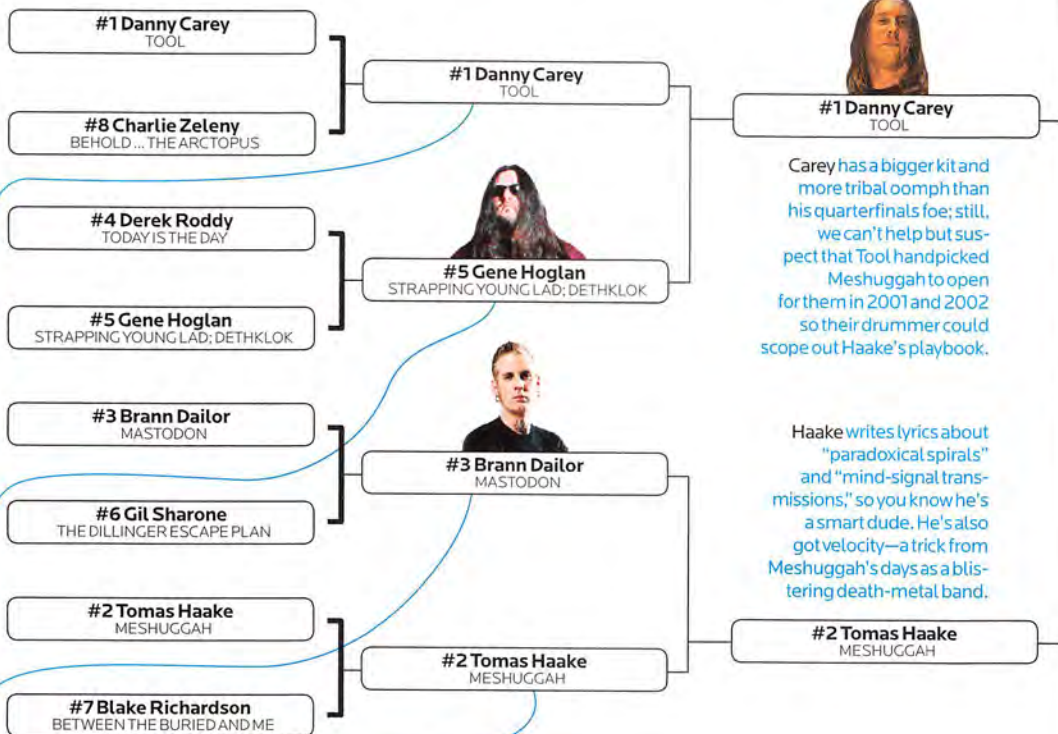
Athens native George Kollias kicks faster with one foot than his peers do with two. But his need for speed could prove his Achilles' heel. (Get it? He's Greek!)

Kevin Talley has pinch-hit for at least two other drummers in this tourney. Now allied with prog-thrashers DAÄTH, he (and Kabbalah) are responsible for widening the band's creative lexicon.

OPENING ROUND

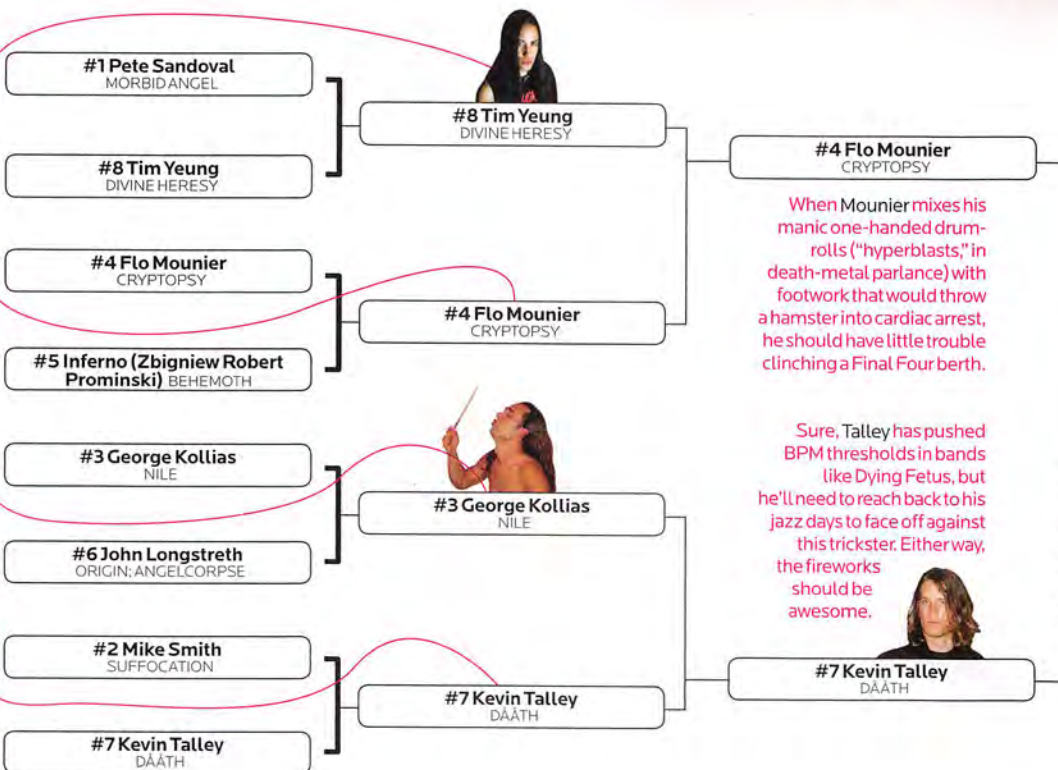
SWEET 16

ELITE 8



Carey has a bigger kit and more tribal oomph than his quarterfinals foe; still, we can't help but suspect that Tool handpicked Meshuggah to open for them in 2001 and 2002 so their drummer could scope out Haake's playbook.

Haake writes lyrics about "paradoxical spirals" and "mind-signal transmissions," so you know he's a smart dude. He's also got velocity—a trick from Meshuggah's days as a blistering death-metal band.



When Mounier mixes his manic one-handed drum-rolls ("hyperblasts," in death-metal parlance) with footwork that would throw a hamster into cardiac arrest, he should have little trouble clinching a Final Four berth.

Sure, Talley has pushed BPM thresholds in bands like Dying Fetus, but he'll need to reach back to his jazz days to face off against this trickster. Either way, the fireworks should be awesome.

TECH METAL

DEATH METAL

SEE PAGE 92 FOR PHOTO CREDITS.



#2 Tomas Haake
MESHUGGAH

Haake could take any lick Mounier launched at him and slow it down until it turned back on itself. He's so far ahead of the pack it's unfair to even shackle him to metal anymore.



#1 Dave Lombardo
SLAYER

Dee's high-speed freakout on Motörhead's "Sacrifice" rivals even the fastest Slayer tracks. But they don't call Lombardo "the godfather of the double bass" for nothing. This one's going down to the wire ...

#2 Tomas Haake
MESHUGGAH

Sorry, Danny, but even Lucifer can't help you clinch this one. Hard as it may be to fathom, most of Meshuggah's tunes are in 4/4: It's the fucked-up alternating patterns, which the seemingly quadruple-jointed Haake plays simultaneously, that make the band so insanely next-level.



CHAMPION

TOMAS HAAKE

MESHUGGAH

#1 Dave Lombardo
SLAYER

Lombardo didn't invent the double-bass pedal, but he turned it into an exclamation point. Even if he'd never recorded another note, his land-speed-record work on Slayer's 1986 thrashterpiece *Reign in Blood* would have cemented his legend for a lifetime.

Haake's drumstick, used during the recording of the new album *obZen*, recorded at Fear and Loathing Studios, Spånga, Sweden, May 2007



#4 Flo Mounier
CRYPTOPSY

Mounier plays so fast and with so much of his kit that Cryptopsy's songs sound like they're raining drums. He's also proof that the best metal drummers look outward for inspiration: Most of his gnarliest tricks originate with '50s jazzbo Buddy Rich.

When Haake locks in to a groove, he sounds like an eight-armed John Bonham pounding his way through the San Andreas Fault. Some drummers may be faster, others may have fancier footwork—but give them a Haake part to learn and they'd fold like pretzels over their snares. "It's very cool," our champ says of his victory. "A lot of these guys are my idols." But he also has a message for all the drummers he beat: "Better luck next time, suckers!"



#5 Mikkey Dee
MOTÖRHEAD

He once kept time behind King Diamond, and every time he launches into "Burner," we're reminded that Motörhead's monstrous tempos aren't just the products of Lemmy's speed habit. Best of all, he looks like every member of Spinal Tap at once. Welcome to the Final Four, Mr. Dee!

#1 Dave Lombardo
SLAYER

No pupil's going to snatch the pebble from this master's hand. Lombardo just needs to pull out his classical, jazz and Afro-Cuban chops to send his challenger back to the rehearsal room.

#1 Dave Lombardo
SLAYER#4 Paul Bostaph
TESTAMENT#1 Dave Lombardo
SLAYER#8 Dave Mackintosh
DRAGONFORCE#4 Paul Bostaph
TESTAMENT#5 Travis Smith
TRIVIUM

Considering he set the benchmark for extreme drumming (his break on Slayer's "Angel of Death" is to metal drummers what the forward pass was to the NFL) Dave Lombardo could dust anyone in this bracket just by doing warm-ups.

Paul Bostaph filled in for Lombardo for four years in the '90s, and rumor has it Slayer no longer plays those tunes live because they're too difficult. But while Bostaph has the clinical chops, his predecessor just plain rips harder.

Chris Adler has a lead-footed style that's based more on intuition and accents than show-offy technical flaunting. Although, as his solos prove, he has that, too.

Jason Bittner's a former Berklee student with filigree and chops to spare, but pitted against a brawler such as Adler, he'd be like that sword fighter who tried to dazzle Indiana Jones: *Swish, flick, bang—dead.*

THRASH METAL

#3 Chris Adler
LAMB OF GOD#3 Chris Adler
LAMB OF GOD#3 Chris Adler
LAMB OF GOD#6 Jordan Mancino
AS I LAY DYING#2 Charlie Benante
ANTHRAX#7 Jason Bittner
SHADOWS FALL#7 Jason Bittner
SHADOWS FALL#5 Mikkey Dee
MOTORHEAD

Dee heads into the quarterfinals with a full arsenal of kick-drum tricks. Jokes about middle-age bellies aside, he may be the most well-rounded drummer in the entire competition.

#1 Lars Ulrich
METALLICA#1 Lars Ulrich
METALLICA#8 Dale Crover
MELVINS#4 Nicko McBrain
IRON MAIDEN#5 Mikkey Dee
MOTORHEAD

Long a punch line among serious drummers, Danish destroyer Lars Ulrich could still squeak his way into the finals if only because he cut *Master of Puppets* before Pro Tools existed.

At 44, Mikkey Dee is among the oldest time-keepers here—but like the rest of Motörhead, he's only gotten faster, stronger and more accurate with age.

A bigger-than-life personality known as much for his boozing and strip-clubbing as for his pedal work, Vinnie Paul Abbott also has a surprising arsenal of prog- and jazz-inspired licks.

CLASSIC METAL

#3 Vinnie Paul Abbott
HELLYEAH#3 Vinnie Paul Abbott
HELLYEAH#6 The Rev (Jimmy Sullivan)
AVENGED SEVENFOLD

Assuming he doesn't invite the guy to his all-nude Clubhouse in Dallas to reminisce about Dimebag Darrell over shots of Jäger, Abbott will probably throw this round out of respect for Dee's legacy. It'd be a killer battle if he didn't, though.

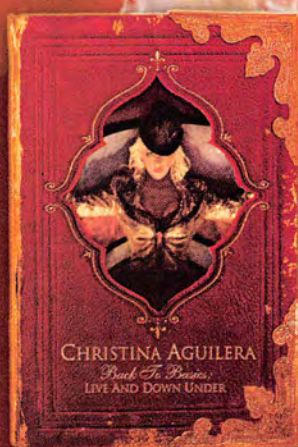
#3 Vinnie Paul Abbott
HELLYEAH#2 Joey Jordison
SLIPKNOT#2 Joey Jordison
SLIPKNOT#7 Dave McClain
MACHINE HEAD

Slipknot's apocalyptic nü metal may have been Joey Jordison's ticket to multiple Grammy nominations, but it's rarely showed him at the peak of his powers. As anyone who's caught him sitting in with Metallica, Ministry or Satyricon will attest, "#1" has four of the fastest limbs in metal.

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surround sound.

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BEST

LIST

TECH



BEST ABSURDLY HIGH-END SPEAKERS

MBL'S 101E RADIALSTRAHLER LOUDSPEAKERS

▶ GERMAN HIGH-END audio-component manufacturer MBL's 101E Radialstrahlers will cost you nearly as much as two years of Harvard (\$54,890 a pair). But who needs education—or a car or food, for that matter—when you've got a pair of speakers this sweet? The handcrafted 101Es have a unique design—the thing that looks like a futuristic Fabergé egg is the midrange speaker—but it's the omnidirectional sound that realizes audiophiles' fantasies. The full MBL Reference System—the 101Es, a pair of power amps, a preamp, a CD component and a digital-to-analog converter—can be had for the take-out-a-second-mortgage price of \$199,000.



BEST IPOD ACCESSORY ION TURNTABLE

Listening to your rare white-label 12-inches on the bus can be a bit cumbersome. Fortunately, there's a solution to your (very pretentious) problem: ION's LP Dock USB Turntable (\$299), which easily converts vinyl tracks to MP3s. Just dock your iPod (latest-gen only) on the table, spin the album and the tunes record straight to your music player. Or use special software that drops the tracks right into your iTunes library. The device works with all record speeds, too, so Grandpa can finally listen to his Glenn Miller Orchestra 78s on his nano.

BEST WAY TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS SIMPLIFY MEDIA

In the Dark Ages, the only way to share music with friends was with a slab of blank TDK cassettes and some dual-deck dexterity. Nowadays, it's as easy as installing Simplify Media (simplifymedia.com) on your Mac or PC. Whether you're loyal to iTunes or Winamp, this free download lets you stream your entire music collection to up to 30 friends over the Net. Share with a pal and his tunes become playable on your computer, too, with only the slightest of load lags before each song. Or run Simplify from the confines of cubicle land to access your home library while "working." Coming soon: a mobile version for the iPhone and the iPod Touch.

BEST NEW RCRD LBL RCRDLBL.COM

The Web site RCRD LBL is pronounced *record label*, but as the missing vowels suggest, it's not exactly a full-fledged label. A joint venture of Pete Rojas, the founder of tech blog Engadget, and Downtown Records, the home of Gnarl's Barkley, Art Brut and Cold War Kids, RCRD LBL is something different: a blog-label hybrid. The ad-supported site partners with other labels to give away exclusive free tracks from indie acts like Justice (collaborating with Mos Def and Spank Rock), José González's band, Junip, and Sam Champion; some artists get paid advances for their exclusive songs and receive a cut of any money RCRD LBL makes from licensing them for, say, TV shows. "The old way of doing business is in trouble," Rojas says. "We're trying to do something positive, rather than sue our way out of our problems like the major labels."

BEST BIG-BROTHER TECHNOLOGY GRACENOTE MUSIC MAP

Know how you put a CD into iTunes and iTunes automatically brings up the song names? That's thanks to Gracenote, whose track-list database iTunes (and other music applications) taps for information. Now, using the satisfyingly sleek interactive map at gracenote.com/map, you can find out who are the most popular artists throughout the world—based on iTunes play—at any given moment. Span the musical globe full of unknown superstars (Portuguese hip-hop squad Da Weasel, anybody?) and unlikely upsets (in Russia, Justin Timberlake has nothing on ... Zamfira!).

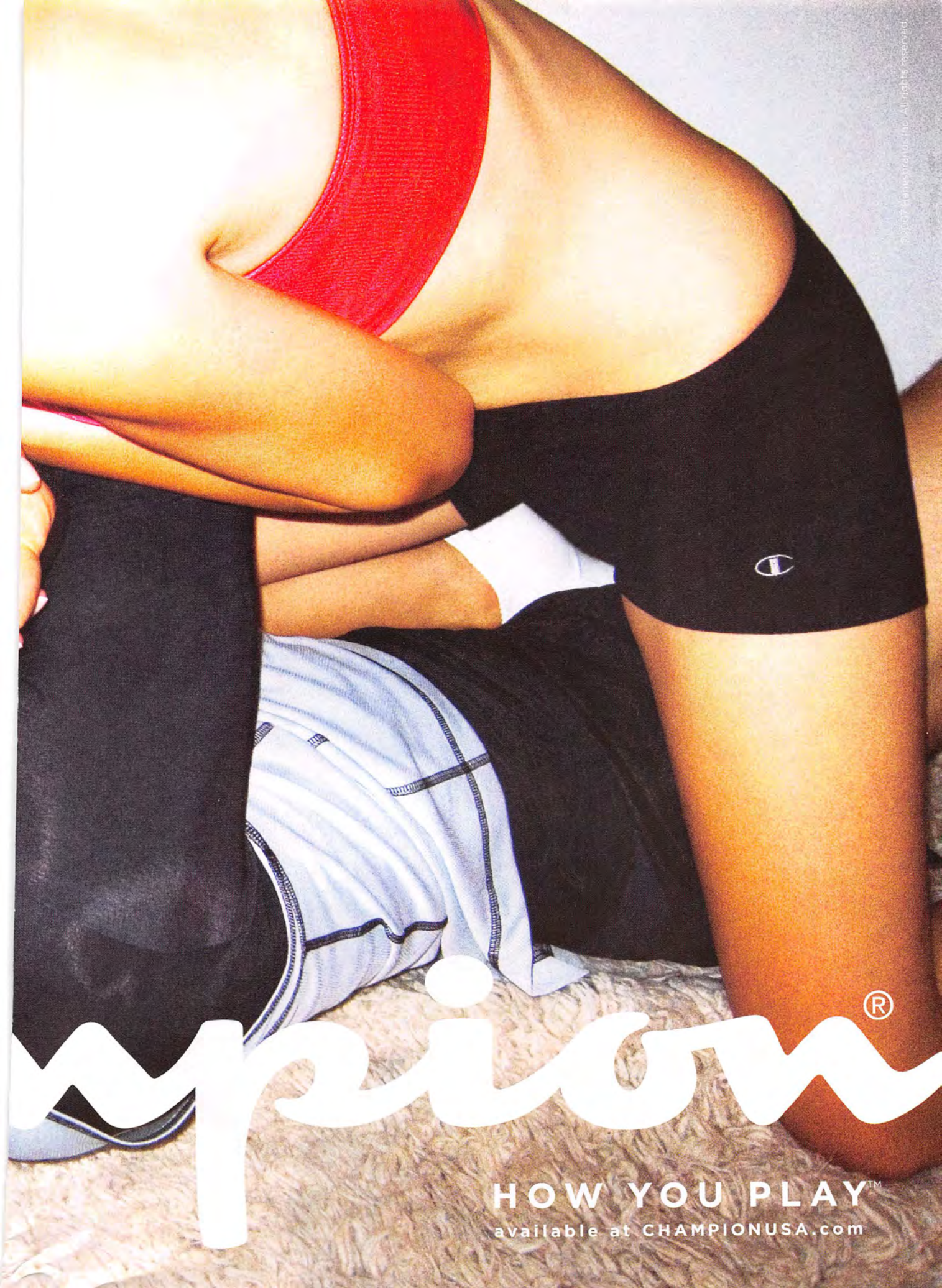
BEST PORTABLE TIME-SUCK PHASE

From the people who brought you the original *Guitar Hero* comes a similar rhythm game, developed for your iPod, that lets you click and spin your fly-wheel in time with any song in your library, for jollies (and points). As you cruise down a highway, notes roll into sight (à la the notes on the *Guitar Hero* fret) and brightly colored animations—taxicabs, construction workers—hypnotically whiz past, helping to drive home *Phase*'s overall vibe of diversionary stupor.





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BEST

LIST

STYLE



BEST CASUALWEAR

DIRECTOR
T-SHIRTS

LORD KNOWS, THERE'S no lack of ironic T-shirts for sale on the Internet. But none straddle the high-low divide as ingeniously as CineFile Video's (cinefilevideo.com) Director T-shirts, which mash-up the names of your favorite art-house auteurs with the logos of classic metal bands. Show your love for the Dogme 95 movement with the stylish VON TRIER/VAN HALEN tee, or big-up New German Cinema with the mighty FASSBINDER/METALLICA design. Also available: INGMAR BERGMAN/IRON MAIDEN, HERZOG/DANZIG and SCORSESE/SCORPIONS.

BEST BODY

GWEN STEFANI

By Mike Alexander, celebrity trainer responsible for (among other body parts) Jessica Simpson's Dukes of Hazzard booty

"It's not easy to juggle a career with a new baby while still looking amazing, but Gwen does it. Her weight doesn't fluctuate, either; she's not heavy one week or really thin the next. I admire her consistency. She looks like she can kick your ass, too."

BEST HAIR

AMY WINEHOUSE

By Sally Hershberger, hairstylist world-renowned for her shag cut and messy blowouts (ask your girlfriend)

"You might think it's an odd choice, but Amy's hair is so cool and outrageous. She has a real look, a '50s-meets-now thing. There aren't a lot of rock girls out there these days, and she's pretty genius."

BEST DRESSED

MIKA

By Richie Rich and Traver Rains, founders of the design house Heatherette, whose trash couture can be seen on Britney Spears and Gwen Stefani

"Mika's fun and refreshing. He has a '70s look—white pants with suspenders, a cool tie, maybe a pin-striped suit—and his trademark is those long, dandy scarves. His style isn't homo or metro; he's Bee Gees—but next level. In a good way!"



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The big chill: Antarctica's annual IceStock festival, December 30, 2007.



BEST MUSIC FESTIVAL

ICESTOCK

ANTARCTICA: HOME TO EMPEROR PENGUINS, VAST ICE FIELDS AND THE GLOBE'S MOST EXCLUSIVE ROCK FEST
BY HUNTER R. SLATON



▶ NO TICKETMASTER CONVENIENCE fees. No lines for the Port-a-Potties. Actually, no Port-a-Potties, period. No yellow-shirted security goons, local radio-station hype men or overpriced, watered-down beer. Subtract all the distasteful parts of summer music festivals and at least 60 degrees Fahrenheit and you've got IceStock, one of the most singular and scenically stunning music festivals on the planet.

IceStock has been held on or around New Year's Day on Antarctica's remote Ross Island—home to McMurdo Station, the U.S. Antarctic Program's premier research facility—since 1990. Station population, which can fall as low as 120 in the southern hemisphere's winter, swells to as much as 1,200 in the summer. The staff is a mix of distinguished scientists, Burning Man devotees, world travelers, roughneck mechanics and in-over-their-heads liberal-arts grads who've taken dishwashing jobs for the season.

The free festival brings everyone together for seven hours of outdoor rock & roll under the bright-white, 24-hour Antarctic sun. Coachella this is not: The stage is made from "two flatbed trailers with a Korean War-era military tent set on them to block the wind," says McMurdo crew member Zim Zimmerman, a 12-year IceStock veteran. The festival grounds, in

sight of the frozen-solid McMurdo Sound and the majestic Royal Society Mountain Range, are demarcated by a dozen hulking cargo-ship containers.

The most recent show, held December 30, featured 13 staff acts, including surfabilly trio Secret Cargo Man, '70s-style funksters Porn Spill, reggae rockers JahChant and the all-female pop-punkers Don Juan Pond. Headliners Muschnuckle, a trio of longtime McMurdo musicians, entertained the parka'd crowd with covers of everyone from Ricky Martin to Rancid.

The day's prospects looked iffy at first. "It was the worst weather I've seen in 12 years," Zimmerman says. Recreation head Stephen Kish, the concert's lead organizer, says he woke at 6:30 A.M. for setup, "only to find the stage covered in two inches of snow and up to six inches by the drum riser."

But that "the show must go on" was a given, even if the gig was taking place in the coldest, windiest, most desolate place on Earth. The only hiccup was a raid on the chili supply by a fearless skua, an Antarctic scavenger bird. And by 4 P.M., says Sky Hofmann, a member of both JahChant and Secret Cargo Man, "the weather took a marvelous turn for the better and warmed up." By which he means the temperature rose to a balmy four degrees below freezing. [BLENDR]

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Tax Lo: Raise your hand if you're at the best dance party ever!

BEST DANCE PARTY

TAX LO AT SONAR, BALTIMORE

EVERY MONTH, HUNDREDS of kids from the mean streets of Baltimore—and the not-so-mean suburbs—pile into a vast downtown warehouse called Sonar for this raucous dance party. (Its name is short for Taxidermy Lodge, a nod to the site's origins.) The crowd is multiracial and given to eye-popping fluorescent outfits, many of which invariably wind up piled in sweaty heaps along the wall by night's end. The resident DJs serve up beats from Baltimore's vibrant "gutter" scene, alongside populist '80s and '90s jams. Goddesses and gods of hip, including M.I.A. and Diplo, perform live when they come through town. What's the vibe on an average night? "Kids go crazy, and I usually get thrown out," says Baltimore raunch-rapper Spank Rock.

BEST JUKEBOX

BEACHLAND BALLROOM & TAVERN, CLEVELAND

The vintage 1966 Rock-Ola at Beachland is free, plays a handpicked mix of vinyl and has never once needed to go to the shop for repair. It holds 80 records, which means 160 sides, all lovingly chosen by Beachland's crate-cruising co-owner Mark Leddy. "It plays 45s, which any real jukebox should," he says. "They are loud and meant to sound good on a jukebox." The cache is heavy on '50s rockabilly, '60s soul and '70s art-rock; Roxy Music's "Love Is the Drug" might follow a George Jones tune recorded under the alias Thumper Jones. While the play list may be ultrahip, Beachland, a former Croatian social club turned bar and live-music joint, has the friendliness of a local dive. Make sure to try the deep-fried peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and wash it down with a Schlitz.

BEST PLACE TO START A BAND

GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

Move over, Brooklyn: Rock's new hot breeding ground is a backwater Florida burg the locals affectionately call Hogtown. Gainesville—best known as the birthplace of Gatorade and Tom Petty—has a little over 50,000 University of Florida students (translation: coeds galore) and dirt-cheap rent that's perfect for broke, slacker-musician types. "I used to live under a staircase for a hundred bucks a month," says Tom Gabel, the frontman for Gainesville natives Against Me!, "and I sold my plasma for \$200 a month." Locally, the punk scene still rules—thanks to veteran acts such as Less Than Jake and the boosterish hometown label No Idea—but friendly venues (Common Grounds, the Atlantic) also make room for up-and-coming indie bands like Morningbell and Papercranes. Plus, February temperatures are in the 70s, and the beach is only an hour in either direction. Beat that, Portland!

BEST RECORD STORE

PRIMITIVE RECORDS, MONTREAL

By A-Trak, Kanye West's DJ and, at age 15, the youngest person ever to win the DMC World DJ Championship

"When I was coming up as a hip-hop DJ I'd spend entire Sunday afternoons here, going through '70s rock, prog and jazz-funk-soul records for samples. There are also a lot of French records, which are a sample gold mine. I haven't taken Kanye yet, but a lot of producers and DJs come through here. The store's not that big, but it's incredibly thorough: I can show up and tell the guy I'm looking for '80s new wave or whatever, and he'll pull out a bunch of stuff you've never heard of. Montreal is on the water, and you tend to find really good records in cities like that—there's a lot of trade that goes in and out. The prices are good here, too. I'll usually drop about \$300 and walk out with a stack of 40 LPs. For real diggers, they have special bins in the back of the store, but you have to be friends with them to get back there."



Primitive Records: Salvaging vinyl geeks not pictured.

BEST

LIST

TRAVEL

BEST ROCK CLUB

THE SOUTHGATE HOUSE, NEWPORT, KENTUCKY

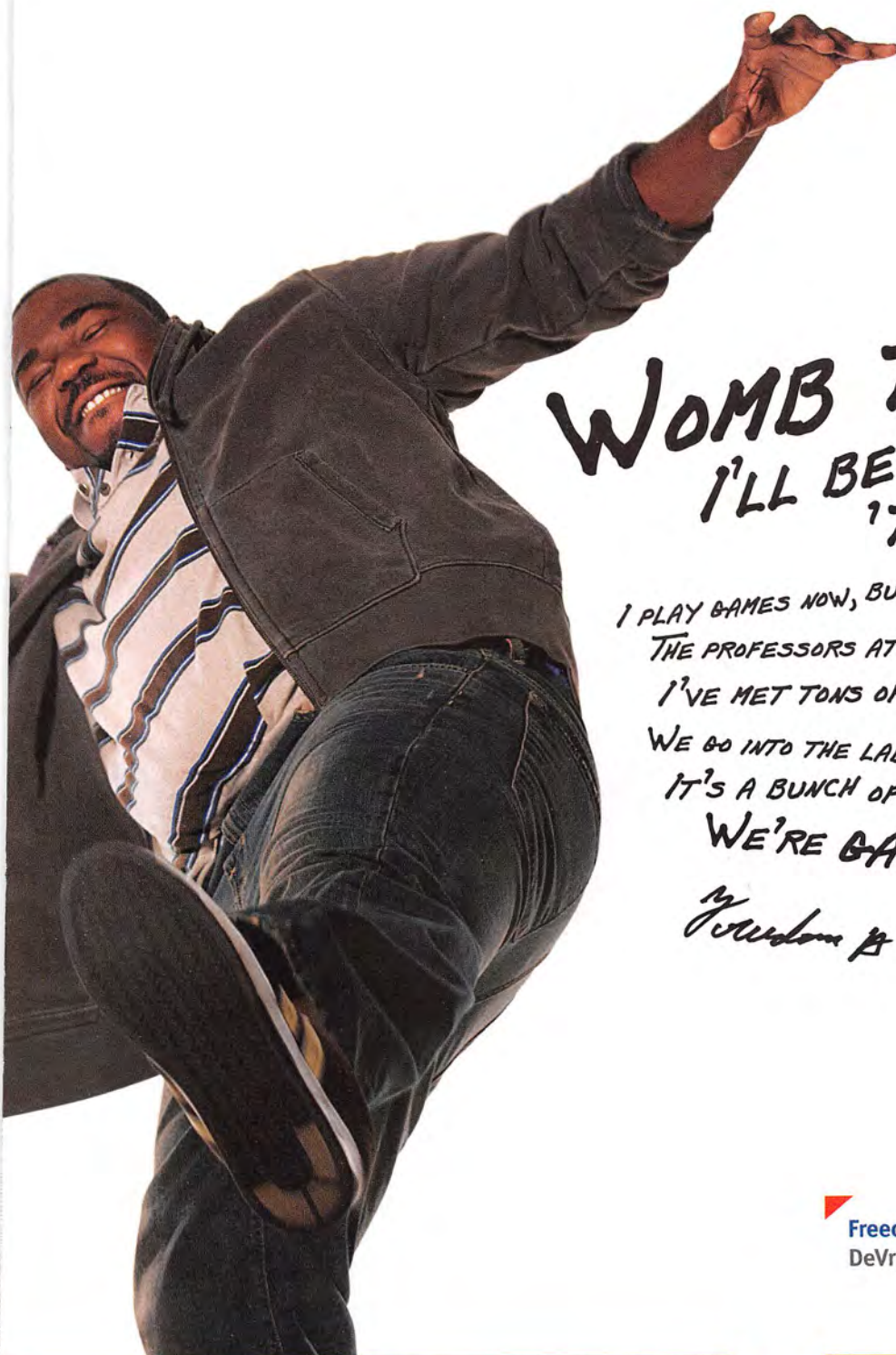
By Bob Pollard, ex-Guided by Voices frontman and indie-rock lifer

"This place has history, man. It's a beautiful old three-story mansion, built nearly 50 years before the Civil War. The inventor of the Tommy Gun was born there, and supposedly Lincoln visited once. But you walk in the door and it's just this crazy house party. There's no security, so you can wander all the secret passageways; our first time there we took a staircase up to the watchtower and smoked a joint. The crowd can get kind of wild—last year someone hit my drummer in the face with a bottle, and they love spitting beer. Also, there's no backstage or band bathroom, so we usually just piss in a bucket. But I love it because there's nowhere to hide. You're basically forced to party."

BEST FAKE-ROCK NIGHT

HYPERION TAVERN, LOS ANGELES

Formerly the site of one of L.A.'s seediest gay bars (think: glory holes), the Hyperion Tavern now hosts a more innocent type of play. Every Wednesday night, the bar—in the hipster-filled Silver Lake neighborhood—puts on a raucous Guitars Hero/Rock Band night. Warning: If you suck at playing the plastic instruments (or singing in tune), you will get booted off stage. Then again, if you rock, you may just get showered with panties.



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ROHTO V

Congratulations to The Bloids for winning the Rohto V® Battle of the Bands! The band has scored a recording session in Las Vegas and is also packing their bags and heading to Austin to perform at SXSW 2008. Listen to their tracks at myspace.com/bloids.



SOCO LEGENDARY NIGHTS

On Thursday, November 8th, Maxim and Blender held a Legendary Night with live performances by The Honorary Title and The Pierces at the Blender Theater in NYC. Guests also enjoyed SoCo, a Mardi Gras photo booth and a chance to appear online at the SoCo Night Institute Video Room. To see exclusive videos, visit soconightinstitute.com



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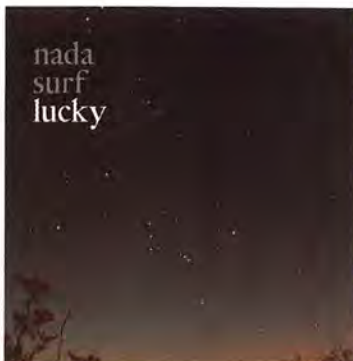
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LED ZEPPELIN

The hard-rock legends put the *boom* in baby boomer with a wildly anticipated U.K. reunion concert.

★★★★



THE MARS VOLTA

Their new CD's an out-there tale of characters named Goliath and Tourniquet Man. Peyote sold separately.

★★★★



SHERYL CROW

With songs about her dislike for Bush and Lance Armstrong, it's the most anti-Texas CD ever.

★★½

THE GUIDE

THEY MAKE 'EM. WE REVIEW 'EM



Cat Power longingly eyes a bowl of Friskies.

START SPREADIN' THE BLUES

A wounded indie queen makes her favorite sad songs even sadder (By JOSH EELLS)

CAT POWER

JUKEBOX ★★★

MATADOR

SHOW CHAN MARSHALL a silver lining and she'll show you a cloud. For the past decade-plus, Marshall—a Southern-gothic fox with a voice like mentholated honey who records under the name Cat Power—has been indie rock's resident queen of the damaged. After

10 years of dark, skeletal blues-folk, she seemed to turn a corner with 2006's *The Greatest*; newly sober and cured of her infamous stage fright, she teamed with a crack band of Memphis session men and reemerged as a hip-shaking, white-soul butterfly. *The Greatest* was unusually fun for a Cat Power record, which can only mean one thing: It's time for the comedown.

Jukebox is what its name suggests: a collection of old-fangled covers spanning seven decades of country, jazz and R&B. (On a >>



Cat Power's
new hat
is creepy.

limited-edition bonus disc, she also covers Lil Wayne's old group, the Hot Boys.) Marshall has always mined the past; her dad, Charlie, was an itinerant Georgia bluesman, and she dots her albums and shows with Appalachian-folk weepers, spooky Delta blues and rugged field-hand hollers. Taking her cues from the gloomiest chapters in the Great American Songbook, she's become the indie nation's ambassador to that Old Weird America.

As a cover artist, Marshall doesn't reinterpret songs so much as dismantle them. On 2000's *The Covers Record*, she razed the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," excising the famous riff and leaving behind a hollowed-out shell—vivisection as art. *Jukebox* isn't quite that bleak—her Dirty Delta Blues band has too much fire—but Marshall still knows how to rip a song's guts out. On the album's opener, a cover of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," she trades the original's brassy horns and chest-out swagger for an ominous-sounding organ and an air of quiet doom.

CHAN MARSHALL KNOWS HOW TO RIP A SONG'S GUTS OUT.

When she sighs about wanting "to wake up in a city that doesn't sleep," she knows that's a city where dreams can never come true.

Some interpreters take hold of a song with their charisma, others through pure vocal might. Marshall works subtly. She revels in sly, unexpected phrasing (Billie Holiday's "Don't Explain"), flickers in and out of hope like a candle (Joni Mitchell's "Blue") and turns meanings inside out with a single, haunting phrase ("I love you," on the Hank Williams

reboot "Ramblin' (Wo)man"). But there's a fine line between subtlety and listlessness, and while Marshall's purr excels at postcoital melancholy or numb disaffection, other times it's just a bore. Her blues aren't nearly as vibrant when they're drenched in gray.

Marshall has long been drawn to victims and underdogs, and the cast of *Jukebox* is full of them. Two of the artists she covers died before age 30, and another drank herself to death. Her own story (canceled shows, endless bottles of scotch) is one of self-sabotage, and there's something endearing, if self-mythologizing, about the way she fills her pantheon with so many talented wrecks. But part of her appeal is that, despite the demons, she's still warm and approachable—especially to the vintage-store shopgirls who covet her beautiful vulnerability and her Chanel modeling contract. Unlike Amy Winehouse, a fellow sister in old-soul whacked-out-edness, Marshall isn't holy-shit-you're-scaring-me messed up; she's more like let-me-brew-you-some-chai-and-give-you-a-hug messed up.

And she's not too cool to express reverence: Her remake of Bob Dylan's "I Believe in You" and a gushy new original called "Song to Bobby" idolize Dylan the way he once idolized Woody Guthrie, and her cover of "Aretha, Sing One for Me" (by '70s-soul also-ran George Jackson) is an homage to an homage.

Still, she's suffered too long to buy into the myth of music as salvation. On a remake of her own "Metal Heart," Marshall quotes a line from "Amazing Grace," and like her "Satisfaction" cover, it's most notable for what she leaves out. "I once was lost, but now I'm found," she sings, "was blind but now I see." Conspicuously absent: anything about being saved.

Download "New York, New York," "Aretha, Sing One for Me"

THE SCORE

★★★★★

CLASSIC

★★★★

GREAT

★★★

GOOD

★★

MEDIocre

★

FOUL

ATLAS SOUND

LET THE BLIND LEAD THOSE
WHO CAN SEE BUT CANNOT FEEL

★★★★½

KRANKY

Deerhunter front dude drops the dress, exposes his ... feelings

On his solo debut, Bradford Cox—the six-foot-four, model-skinny frontman who enjoys wearing summer dresses when he performs with his noisy main band, Deerhunter—sinks, phantomlike, into lush, highly processed arrangements of organ, drum machine and (evidently) whatever instrument is laying around. The disappearing act really can be magical: On "Recent Bedroom," he repeats the cringe-y lines, "I walked outside/I could not cry ... I don't know why," until they're a lovely, abstract sine wave weaving through the song's stately fuzz. He sings like his voice might crack, quietly and a bit flat; combined with the layered, faintly propulsive music, the effect is strangely compelling—something like overhearing urgent, coded messages. He calls another fine track "Ativan," but this album's not tranquilized—it's a bracing slice of blue.

NICK CATUGGI

Download "Recent Bedroom," "Cold as Ice"

NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

POCKETFUL OF SUNSHINE

★★★★½

EPIC

Superstar Brit-chick is all sweetness and light

Natasha Bedingfield is pioneering a new persona: pop diva as sweetie pie. She has cover-girl looks and large lungs, but her music is less prepossessing, more polite and (check the album title) far happier than that of her starlet counterparts. Bedingfield's second U.S. release sticks mostly to love odes and peppy self-help bromides, which occasionally veer close to Colbie Caillat's lake of goop. It would be irksome if not for the uniformly strong pop and R&B songcraft—highlighted by the

Sean Kingston collaboration "Love Like This," the best ballad of its ilk since Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together"—and Bedingfield's big-toned, nimble vocals. She cruises through the slick syncopations in "Piece of Your Heart," an atypically dark banger with an imitation Timbaland synth line. But after that brief brooding detour, it's back to counting blessings. "Got my dreams, got my life, got my love/Got my friends, got the sunshine above," she coos in a song called—what else?—"Happy."

JODY ROSEN

Download "Love Like This," "Piece of Your Heart"

BLACK MOUNTAIN

IN THE FUTURE ★★☆☆

JAG JAGUWAR

Metal throwbacks offer an inconvenient truth for a fallen world

**STONED
THAN UR**

The inside booklet (remember those?) of this Canadian stoner-rock quintet's

sophomore CD depicts the future as a queasy nuclear wasteland. Imagine a bombed-out version of Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* cover—the babes have been vaporized and the misty mountains are rubble. Filled with folkloric tales of evil "tyrants," "witchery" and hidden "demons," *In the Future* conjures a hellish vision somewhere between the Brothers Grimm's haunted forests and Zep's miasmic moors. More diabolical and daring than the band's shaggy 2005 debut, *Future* peaks with the primordial "Bright Lights," a near-17-minute opus that finds singers Stephen McBean and Amber Webber chanting spookily over sacrificial drums before a kill-em-all riff turns off the lights for good. No future? No problem.

RYAN DOMBAL

Download "Angels," "Bright Lights," "Stay Free"

RIVERS CUOMO

ALONE: THE HOME RECORDINGS OF RIVERS CUOMO ★★☆☆

GEFFEN

Weezer frontman finds goodies in the trash

This collection of 15 years of home recordings from alt-rock's aging geek-Jesus isn't an "album" so much as 18 crazy what-if scenarios. Some are endearingly autistic: What if Cuomo had only learned one chord on a dinky

acoustic guitar and thought chess explained the universe ("Chess")? And some are sublimely ridiculous: What if he had finished his unreleased outer-space rock opera ("Dude We're Finally Landing")? What if he had been ... Ice Cube ("The Bomb")? Enjoying the album's best cuts requires less imagination; the swaying fuzz guitars and sweet off-kilter falsettos of "Lemonade" could've made Weezer's masterful debut, and a dirgelike proto-"Buddy Holly" plods gloriously. But the Coldplay-esque misfire "This Is the Way," from 2007, is a frightening what-if for the upcoming Weezer disc: Rivers, you can't change the past, but you can still control the future.

ALEX BENENSON

Download "Lemonade," "Long-time Sunshine"

RAY DAVIES

WORKING MAN'S CAFÉ ★★☆☆

NEW WEST/AMMAL

English rock godfather takes bullet, hates America

When it comes to writing beautiful, wistfully nostalgic tunes, no one can top former Kinks frontman Ray Davies. Sadly, when it comes to writing satiric studies of modern life, Jessica Simpson couldn't do much worse. So this album about the seamy, scary side of Bush-land, conceived after Davies was shot in New Orleans in 2004, is a mixed bag of pointed personal reflection (Good Ray) and facile social critique (Bad Ray). Hard-bitten yet graceful folk-rock melodies can't save one-dimensional riffs on globalization, religion and Iraq. But they add a twist of classic-Kinks irony to songs about his befuddled old-geezerness and harrowing holiday in the Big Easy. Any 63-year-old who can write wittily about his stay in a hospital deserves a hearing, even if you'd want to avoid his political blog.

JOHN DOLAN

Download "Morphine Song," "One More Time"

DENGUE FEVER

VENUS ON EARTH ★★☆☆½

MBO

L.A. band that sometimes sings in Khmer—as heard on *Weeds*

Shameless sentiment ruled during Cambodian pop's '60s and '70s heyday—before the Khmer Rouge spoiled the fun by imprisoning and killing many of its stars. Dengue Fever singer Chhom Nimol, >>

BUSHWHACKED

Rock & roll party girl airs her sense of disgust

SHERYL CROW

DETOURS ★★½

GEFFEN

SHERYL CROW'S BEEN working up to this. Shortly before the Iraq invasion, she wore a NO WAR guitar strap onstage at the Grammys. Last year she joined environmentalist Laurie David for a Stop Global Warming college tour and sparred with former Bush adviser Karl Rove during a Washington, D.C., dinner. She's 46, a single mother who's survived breast cancer and her breakup with Lance Armstrong. The sun-soaking rock-chick persona that's served her well since her 1994 debut is getting old. She sure seems to think so.

On her sixth studio album, Crow gets superserious, tackling one heavyweight topic after another. "God Bless This Mess" starts as an off-the-cuff acoustic rumination on family holidays, then balloons into a bitter appraisal of Bush's post-9/11 march to war. "Shine Over Babylon" is a surrealist diatribe about America's failed Mideast policies. "Love Is Free" condemns the havoc Bush's Katrina response wreaked on ordinary lives. And "Diamond Ring" is a primal scream about the Armstrong affair: "Diamond ring/Fucks up everything," she wails. Apparently he's her least favorite mistake.

For all its ambitions, *Detours* aims too low. Crow camouflages her leftist ideas in lighter-than-usual Stones grooves and flat arena beats, as if hoping the red-staters won't notice she's gone pink. "Gasoline" offers an apocalyptic vision of rioting farmers and Mini Cooper drivers fighting over dwindling reserves, then cheats out with a feel-good chorus: "Gasoline will be free/Yeah yeah yeah." "Out of Our Heads" is an unwelcome Madonna moment that matries sermonizing with disco overload. The party atmosphere feels forced.

Detours works better when it scales back. The title track is an intimate country lilt about feeling bereft and unloved and needing her mom. "Mother, teach me to love with a paper-thin heart," Crows sings, in a pitch-perfect voice hanging between country ache, soul yearning and pop eloquence. It's cute, it's sad, it's a killer and a beaut—just like Crow, when she remembers to trust her instincts.

KAREN SCHOEMER

Download "Detours"



Crow: "I really need to buy myself a table."

Guess which Hot Chip member always meets his daily potassium requirements?



THE CD WE'RE TOTALLY GAY FOR

HOT CHIP

MADE IN THE DARK ★★☆☆

DFA/ASTRALWORKS

Wonky techno Brits lose their inhibitions



HOT CHIP ARE masters of the mixed message. Their hallmark—exemplified by Alexis Taylor's sweet, pensive vocals and alternately heartfelt and wiseass lyrics—is an ambivalence they mine for both pathos and humor. Even their party-igniting hit "Over and Over," from 2006's acclaimed *The Warning*, was born from self-consciousness, an addictively repetitive song about addictive repetition. On their third LP, *Hot Chip* pick up on the energy of their live shows: Even as they cherry-pick from seemingly incongruous sources (deep house, hard rock, smooth R&B), there's a newfound decisiveness, a move toward heavier beats, meatier grooves and warmer sentiments. "Ready for the Floor," a nova-bright burst of geek-disco with a rubbery Daft Punk-meets-Talking Heads pulse, is destined to supplant "Over and Over" as their signature tune. And the minimal slow jams hold their own against the dense stompers. The title song, an apparent ode to conception, conjures a womb-like vibe, but it also sums up Hot Chip's approach. Sometimes the best decisions are made in the dark.

DENNIS LIM

Download "Ready for the Floor," "Shake a Fist," "Made in the Dark"

plucked from Southern California's expatriate Cambodian community, draws directly on that era's emotional excesses, while brothers Ethan and Zac Holtzman add a wily blend of twangy surf rock, spaghetti-Western arrangements and Farfisa-driven psychedelic ornamentation to her echoey Asian angst. The Los Angeles-based band's third album (and first to consist entirely of original material) is front-loaded with the transcendent "Seeing Hands" and the savvy bicultural duets "Tiger Phone Card" (a Wong Kar-Wai-ready ode to love and Ambien) and "Sober Driver" (about a literal motor-booty affair). But even the otherworld instrumental "Oceans of Venus"

can't counterbalance *Venus's* ballad-heavy bottom half.

RICHARD GEHR

Download "Seeing Hands," "Sober Driver"

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS

BRIGHTER THAN CREATION'S DARK ★★☆☆½

NEW WEST

Southern rockers turn down the volume, crank up the disillusionment

During an 11-year career celebrating the complexity of redneck culture beyond trailer parks and marrying your sister, Drive-By Truckers have applied short-fiction lyrics to ornery roadhouse rock and boozy ballads. Their seventh album, and first since



Alison Goldfrapp and the Wise Potato Chips owl make their relationship public.

the departure of ace singer-writer Jason Isbell, features more dead-end characters ruined by violence and drugs, but *Brighter* is unique for its air of quiet resignation about misery. Though less dynamic, the weary mid-tempo arrangements embody the album's crushing hopelessness, tempered only by John Neff's elegant pedal steel. In turn, songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley tell stories with unhappy endings: "Checkout Time in Vegas" chronicles a Sin City trip that's more grim hangover than up-all-night sexcapade, while "The Home Front" observes an emotionally numb wife awaiting her soldier husband's return. When Hood sings about riding off into the sunset on the closing track, there's no sense of triumph—only retreat.

TIM GRIERSON

Download "Opening Act," "The Home Front"

GOLDFRAPP

SEVENTH TREE ★★☆☆½

MUTE

British duo swaps machine-made pop dreams for something more natural

Bad news for pole dancers: After three albums steeped in crotch-level electronic glam, Goldfrapp are stepping out for some fresh air. The sylvan folk of opening song "Clowns" wafts in from

the same misty Arcadia as Nick Drake or Sandy Denny, with Alison Goldfrapp's voice as high and pure as birdsong, and only the ecstatic rush of "Caravan Girl" stands any chance of igniting a dance floor. It's a drastic twist,

but not an improbable one. Beneath her disco-dominatrix duds, Goldfrapp was always an outdoorsy romantic at heart, going back to 2000's *Felt Mountain*. Will Gregory's sparkling webs of acoustic guitar, synth and strings allow the more slender melodies to slide into vaporous prettiness, but Goldfrapp's voice remains extraordinary, as witchily sensual as Kate Bush's, as otherworldly as a theremin. Applied to the extravagantly gorgeous powerhouse ballad "A&E," it could reduce any heart to a puddle.

DORIAN LYNKEY

Download "Little Bird," "A&E," "Caravan Girl"

JA RULE

THE MIRROR ★★☆☆

MURDER INC./UNIVERSAL MOTOWN

50 Cent's former foe returns—and wonders where his friends are

In hip-hop, the only thing worse than an album with too many cameos is one with not enough. Subpar MCs can disguise weakness with a guest list full of talented homies—it worked for Ja Rule on his first few albums. But when even Charli Baltimore

stops returning your calls ... well, that's a sure sign you're in trouble. On his seventh CD, the 31-year-old vet is still likable enough, with his elfin charm and a growl like a bichon frise. But the rote crime fantasy "Enemy of the State" and the abominable remake of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" (retitled "Father Forgive Me") ooze fallen-star pathos. Just a few years ago Ja was bumping booties with Jennifer Lopez; now he's bragging about "ridin' down Rodeo with twins that resemble J. Lo." He may as well cop some cubic-zirconia bling and one of those Chryslers that kinda looks like a Bentley and call it a day.

JOSH EELLS

Download "Uh-Ohhh!"

JACK JOHNSON

SLEEP THROUGH THE STATIC

★★★★½

BRUSHFIRE

Hawaii-born surfer dude sees shark fins in the Pacific Ocean

Here's the thing about Jack Johnson. When he sings, "I've got an angel, she doesn't wear any ...," it's never going to be *knickers* or *socks* she doesn't wear, it's gonna be *wings*, because Jack Johnson always follows the straightest path between points. On his fifth CD, Johnson sounds airier than ever—but you'd be a fool to believe that makes him an airhead. With a few more electric flourishes than before, he makes it all feel light as sea foam, as though his music is pure afterthought. The more you listen, the less soothing his songs become; this is drifty music about living a rootless life where satisfaction is elusive. "You better hope you're not alone," he sings in one bright moment; all over this CD, staring into the sun, he fears we are.

RJ SMITH

Download "If I Had Eyes," "Adrift"

JEFFREY LEWIS

12 CRASS SONGS ★★☆☆

ROUGH TRADE

Odd-couple alert! Unassuming NYC boho takes on riotous punk icons

Crass were a group of Thatcher-punking late-'70s/early-'80s anarchists bent on destroying England's political and musical establishment from the inside. Jeffrey Lewis is a mumbly New York singer-songwriter bent on creating downtown boho ditties that rival Pete Wentz in both wordiness and insularity. So Lewis's new album of Crass covers might seem like a hipster goof at first. But his endearing reverence permeates the record, whether he's grafting the every-

Nada Surf cleverly hide their bassist's wall eye.



man parable "Systematic Death" with shambolic strumming and bongos or reimagining the snotty "End Result" as a fingerpicking torch hymn. And, when Lewis deadpans, "I'm tired of staring up a superstar's ass," on "Punk Is Dead," the unlikely bond between the downtrodden underground rambler and his steel-toed forebears makes perfect sense.

RYAN DOMBAL

Download "I Ain't Thick, It's Just a Trick," "Punk Is Dead," "Banned From the Roxy"

THE MAGNETIC FIELDS

DISTORTION ★★☆☆½

NONESUCH

A pop savant goes gaga for '80s punk heroes

Most musical sad sacks stick to the same dour style, but New York tune machine Stephin Merritt continually finds new ways to freshen up his permanent bummer. The only vintage genre

this unconventional indie icon hasn't filtered through his thrift-shop synths and dry wit is loud guitar-rock—until now: His ninth album pays homage to the Jesus and Mary Chain, '80s Scots who buried bubblegum in fields of feedback. Every instrument here distorts, giving tearjerkers like "I'll Dream Alone" complementary grit. The bass-voiced Tin Pan Alley fan even outdoes the J&MC's blend of amphetamine vitriol and Beach Boys worship, via a take on "California Girls" bristling with baneful bons mots: "They come on like squares/Then get off like squirrels." Like a honeyed melody, his cynicism sticks.

BARRY WALTERS

Download "California Girls," "Too Drunk to Dream"

THE MARS VOLTA

THE BEDLAM IN GOLIATH ★★☆☆

UNIVERSAL REPUBLIC

Epic lunges from a Texas group that chases the dead

Rockers have always gone to extremes in a quest for inspiration—holing up in castles, hanging with spiritualists, snorting powdered panther bones. For their mind-bending fourth album, the Mars Volta tapped a source familiar to generations of stoned junior-high kids: a Ouija board. Guitarist Omar Rodriguez-Lopez found one in a Jerusalem curio shop and, he claims, instant messages from the Otherworld started coming fast and furious. Never before have these kings of experimental metal sustained such pulse-quicken energy, honing their tricks—cryp-

tic lyrics, cliffhanging cries, spine-twisting rhythms—into a screaming arrow of sound. An occult mind game in 12 suitelike episodes, it follows the exploits of Goliath and Tourniquet Man, lost souls caught up in elaborate webs of lust, betrayal and murder. Or something like that. The *Twilight Zone* clues work because everything around them thunders and roars. The Ouija tale may be BS, but it proves that Goliath is such a badass monster, even the Mars Volta are a little spooked.

TOM MOON

Download "Metatron," "Goliath," "Wax Simulacra"

NADA SURF

LUCKY ★★☆☆

BARSUK

Hard-luck Brooklyn nice guys write sweet songs and dream small dreams

Nada Surf are a lovable lost cause. After having a mini-hit with 1996's Weezer-like high-school dating-advice rant, "Popular," the Brooklyn trio hobbled into the '00s writing tender indie-rock tunes about smart romantics watching their youngish promise dissolve into not-so-youngish letdown. On record five, their lovely, surging melodies suggest a minor-league Coldplay, while singer-guitarist Matthew Caws recalls a lost golden age "when I could fix anything with sound." He's so used to his cocoon of ambivalence that even when he sheepishly prays for "serenity inside of me," it sounds like he wouldn't know what to do with inner peace even if he found it. Besides, a guy clever enough to quote "Stairway to Heaven" in a song about failure should stick to what he knows. Transcendence, like popularity, isn't for everyone.

JON DOLAN

Download "Whose Authority," "Weightless"

KATE NASH

MADE OF BRICKS ★★☆☆

GEFFEN

A 20-year-old U.K. chart phenom, much less caustic than her countrygirls

GOSSIP GIRL

The singer-songwriter Kate Nash is constantly compared to Lily Allen and Amy

Winehouse: She's young, she's British, she's stylin' and she'll call a lame boyfriend a "dick-head." But she's more nice girl than tabloid fodder. And instead of a hip-hop jones, she aims for the cheery piano folk of a Regina Spektor. Her story-songs about crushes gone wrong and nerdy social skills are like late- >>



I LOVE THIS CD!
PAUL RUDD

**BAND OF HORSES
CEASE TO BEGIN**

SUB POP

"Some of it sounds kinda country, and some of it is all sad and emo-ish. But the whole thing pretty much rocks."

Vampire Weekend,
devotees of Oprah's
Book Club.



QUAD SQUAD

Recent college grads get an A- in Advanced Rock Chic

VAMPIRE WEEKEND

VAMPIRE WEEKEND ★★☆☆

XL

IN "OXFORD COMMA," Ezra Koenig ponders a question straight out of a preppies-behaving-badly Whit Stillman film. "Who gives a fuck about an Oxford comma?" he sings over a staccato organ riff, coyly angling for a nerdy, flirty debate. Addressing a lover whose blood is as blue as his, he's referring to a finer point of punctuation, and as the song swells with angsty, Afropop-tinged guitars, Koenig shouts out both Lil Jon and the Dalai Lama.

Fond of showing off their bonus-miles-worthy worldliness ("Spilled kefir/On your keffiyah"), this quartet of blog-hyped Columbia University grads pick up the thread of 1980s world beat exemplified by Paul Simon, Talking Heads and Peter Dinklage. Though they know their Congolese soukous and vintage calypso, they never lose footing in their taut, hook-heavy pop tunes. "M79" follows an impressionistic bus trip across Central Park ("pollination yellow cab"), its harpsichord and chamber strings—arranged by the group's instrumental mastermind, Rostam Batmanglij—given bounce by a cool early-ska lilt. Koenig's slippery tenor is boyish but not innocent; he sounds as if he's asking questions he already knows the answers to, whether on a date or in the classroom.

Musical explorers run the risk of becoming simple tourists, spicing up their material with hints of exotica. And the endless hopscotching—from Dharamsala to Hyannisport to NYC—is steeped in leisurely privilege (they jokingly call their sound Upper West Side Soweto). But Vampire Weekend's version of globalization is too tightly and smartly woven to be mere dilettantism, and at times Koenig is emphatic, even desperate, about escaping white-bred familiarity. In "Walcott," he urges a friend: "Don't you know/That your life could be lost?/Out of Cape Cod tonight." In other words, find new places, new sounds.

BEN SISARIO

Download "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa," "Oxford Comma," "Walcott"



Sons & Daughters: "We need a bigger loo."

night IMs set to coffeehouse guitars: "Don't tell me that you didn't try to check out my bum/'Cause I know that you did 'cause your friend told me that you liked it," she sings on "Merry Happy." "Foundations" is yet another night-out-in-England missive, from beery argument to puke-stained sneakers, but it's also a self-aware look at a mutually sadistic relationship she can't quite quit.

SIA MICHEL

Download "Foundations," "Pumpkin Soup"

JACK PEÑATE

MATINEE ★★☆☆

XL

Friendly British busker, 23, is hailed as "the male Kate Nash" back in the U.K.

The ska revival apparently isn't limited to Lily Allen. On his debut, this mop-headed British troubadour is even more infatuated with zippy rhythms and up-stroked guitars (and his own spazzy dance steps). Peñate sings with a trace of Cockney, and in his lyrics he's not above girl-crazy lust or admitting to being a cad. But he's ultimately a good boy who loves resistance-is-futile hooks, and his unabashed zest is winning. His mostly jubilant songs and delivery also divert attention from lyrics that can drift into new-age haze or embrace goofiness ("I act stupid, due to Cupid"). Even when he tries to make a connection between pickup lines and international tension, in "Made of Codes," Peñate never forgets that even quasi-protest songs need a good beat.

DAVID BROWNE

Download "Spit at Stars," "Second, Minute or Hour"

THE RAVEONETTES

LUST LUST LUST ★★½

VICE

Glammy Danes exit major label, push distortion pedal to the metal

On the 2005 album from this coed Danish duo, singer-guitarist Sune Rose Wagner and bassist-singer Sharin Foo did away with the guitar fuzz they'd lavished on their homages to girl groups and '50s rockers, leaving behind likable little song-baubles. But on their third full-length, the dissonance is back with a vengeance—along with their early fixations on sex, death and the nonliteral (we think) intersection of the two. It's as if, finding their retro influences too vanilla, they decided to drench everything in dark syrup—and (lyrically speaking) shove in some bananas. Overall, the tracks range from overserious and plodding to cloying and jumpy ("Expelled From Love" and "You Want the Candy," respectively—the names say it all). Mostly, though, the overdriven guitar and singsongy evocations of early rock & roll make for a bit of a muddle. Maybe it's just that now we know they clean up so nice.

NICK CATUCCI

Download "Dead Sound"

SAVIOURS

INTO ABADDON ★★☆☆

KEMADO

An AC/DC with more epic aims

On their second album, Savours neatly divide their aspirations between the fresh and the familiar. They wear their influences on their beer-soaked sleeves, forging aggressive and catchy riffs from punk, classic thrash and the great lords Iron Maiden.

But this meat-and-potatoes stuff perfectly offsets their melodic harmonic and rhythmic tricks. "Cavern of Mind" gallops into off-kilter jazz-metal; "Narcotic Sea" melts into deep prog. Saviours don't take themselves too seriously and have none of Mastodon's fanciness or High on Fire's gloom. Just listen to singer-guitarist Austin Barber, who sticks to a single raspy pitch the entire record: He sounds like a knucklehead whose solution to life's challenges is to yell at them.

ERIK DAVIS

Download "Raging Embers," "Cavern of Mind," "Mysticism"

SIMPLE PLAN

SIMPLE PLAN ★★

LAVA/ATLANTIC

French-Canadian goofs try to lively up by hiring Britney's pop guru

Adolescence can be scary—not just for teens who take solace in *feeling-bad-feels-good* pop-punk, but for the bands, too. Exhibit A: Simple Plan, peppy Canucks who, on their first two albums, seemed content to riff on the travails of childhood and make a few good balls jokes in the process. Album three aims for maturity, but the results are stunted. 'Roided up by the carnival beats and stabby synths of (respectively) Timbaland associate Danja-handz and Britney Spears producer Max Martin, the band lurches from simpering sentiment ("Save You," "I Can't Wait Forever") to aggro-dude claptrap ("Love Is a Lie," "Time to Say Goodbye") with nary an emo cliché left unturned. Only the hooky opener, "When I'm Gone," hints at a promising adulthood.

ANDY GREENWALD

Download "When I'm Gone"

SONS & DAUGHTERS

THIS GIFT ★★½

DOMINO

Dark, thrashing morality tales on Scots' second album

Pray you never end up the subject of a Sons & Daughters song. The wretches that

Adele Bethel sneers about in a Glaswegian burr have no way out of their desperate fates, like the woman in the Stooges-meet-Edward Gorey dirge "The Nest,"

tormented by thoughts of absent, possibly aborted children. The strangled guitars and chain-gang-of-the-damned rhythm section don't convey hope, either.

There's an exhilarating and ruthless intensity here, mingling the grimness of country murder ballads with the simplicity of girl-group pop. It culminates, in the totally possessed "House in My Head," with a claustrophobic shriek from some kind of psychic prison: "Somebody I knew threw away the key." Bethel doesn't specify the crime, but she's never getting out alive.

BEN SISARIO

Download "The Nest," "Gilt Complex"

TAB THE BAND

PULLING OUT JUST ENOUGH TO WIN ★★

NORTH STREET

Sons of Aerosmith guitarist make top-level Aerosmith knockoffs

Joe Perry's boys sure love their dad. At a moment when we're being inundated by rock progeny, some deserving and most not, only Jason Bonham recalls ancestral glories the way Tab do Aerosmith. Resort to early Stones comparisons if you like—that's what everyone did with Joe's band back before guitarist Tony and bassist-vocalist Adrian were there to come home to. So live with it—there are many worse things in music than scaled-down arena rock. Adrian's stage drawl is a little regressive, and Reverend Run should tell them about jimmy hats—"as long as you and I don't make a child" plus "the rabbit done died" plus the album title bodes ill for second-generation groupies. But this band rawks without reverence or irony; every one of its sexist songs fresh and enthusiastic.

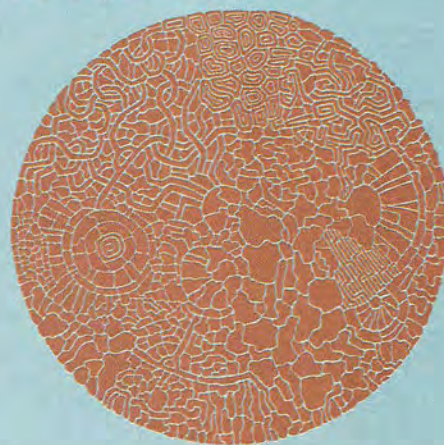
ROBERT CHRISTGAU

Download "Secretary's Day," "CVT" >>



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TIMES NEW VIKING

RIP IT OFF ★★☆☆½

MATADOR

Let the early-'90s lo-fi noise-pop revival begin

Indie-rockers love digging through pop's ruins like they're scavenging in Grandma's attic. But the rule usually is: The older and weirder, the better. This rambunctious Columbus, Ohio, trio love the relatively recent golden age of Guided by Voices's and Pavement's artfully skuzzy early singles ('89-'93), searching for the candy center in music that is sweet beneath blasts of static. Keyboardist-vocalist Beth Murphy yammers happily despite drowning in an ocean of blare so abrasive it almost parodies their heroes' purposefully crappy recording values. Bits of discernable singing like, "We don't care what time it is!" make the anachronistic style seem defiant—but listen deep and cheerleader-peppy melodies bubble to the surface. It's just kids making a racket, nothing too arty about that.

JON DOLAN

Download "Times New Viking vs. Yo La Tengo," "Post Teen Drama"

THE WHIGS

MISSION CONTROL ★★☆☆

ATO

Let the early-'90s alt-rock revival begin

They hail from Athens, Georgia, the birthplace of college rock. They recorded their lo-fi debut in a frat house while still undergrads at UGA. No wonder the Whigs' 2005 *Give 'Em All a Big Fat Lip* sounded like a campus-radio transmission that had been bouncing around the stratosphere for 15 years: scrappy like the Replacements, alt-twangy like Uncle Tupelo and about half as good as both. This successor improves, sonically (recording in a studio with a producer will do that) and in its energy and sharp writing. A sense of cockiness even creeps in: "Cause I don't care, I'm already young," front-man Parker Gispert boasts. The Whigs are starting to sound like big men on campus.

MARK YARM

Download "Like a Vibration," "Already Young"

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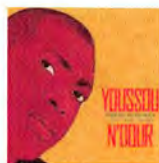
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Nashville's king of pain stages a one-man episode of *CMT Crossroads*, rocking harder than ever.



YOUSSOU N'DOUR

ROKKU MI ROKKA (GIVE AND TAKE)

NONESUCH

An Afropop giant makes Senegal sound like Kentucky on this countrified set.



RADIOHEAD
IN RAINBOWS

TBD

Thom Yorke & Co.'s spooky-ass make-out album gets an actual CD release. How retro!



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LEGALLY YOURS

An overlooked soul masterpiece, wrought in relationship hell *By* ROBERT CHRISTGAU

MARVIN GAYE

HERE, MY DEAR: EXPANDED EDITION **★★★★**

HIP-SELECT

FEW ALBUMS HAVE a juicier back story than Marvin Gaye's *Here, My Dear*—maybe none. An ex-drummer who put aside his dreams of cocktail crooning and applied his willowy baritone to some of the most delicately turned and rhythmically complex smashes of the soul era, Gaye broke free of Motown formula mid-career, politically with 1971's *What's Going On* and sexually with 1973's *Let's Get It On*. But his life was a mess, and so this special double-LP was conceived by a judge and Gaye's divorce lawyer; the advance and presumed royalties were the only way Marvin could fund an exit from his ruined marriage to Anna Gordy, the sister of Motown headman Berry Gordy and Gaye's serial cheatee since 1964. The singer intended to meet his obligation with hackwork—but then, as was his wont, became obsessed. Pop is full of records about love gone sour. How many

include lines like "Somebody tell me please, tell me please/Why do I have to pay attorney fees?"

So, we get bizarre, naked lyrics. Some were meant to sadden or enrage Anna: the title song, with its "You don't have the right to use a son of mine/To keep me in line," or such self-explanatory *coups de pointe* as "When Did You Stop Loving Me, When Did I Stop Loving You" and "Anger." But others—the equally self-explanatory "I Met a Little Girl," or "Anna's Song," with its milk bath and kids laughing in the snow—warmly honor his wife and the love they'd shared. The long, loopy "A Funky Space Reincarnation," in which Marvin and Anna seem destined or doomed to mate forever, combines the two moods.

Released with minimal label support in 1978, at the height of disco madness, *Here, My Dear* tanked. Yet because it was conceived beginning-to-end both musically and emotionally, it actually contains less filler than the more hallowed *What's Going On* and *Let's Get It On*. The sing-

ing never approaches the hard-earned muscularity of Gaye hits from "Can I Get a Witness" to "Sexual Healing," and there's not a surefire single anywhere. But encountered today, these peculiarities aren't flaws; Gaye's vocals are unerringly subtle and supple, intricate polyrhythms carry the talkiest melodies and at least half the songs are catchy and moving. The six-minute "When Did You Stop Loving Me" is almost as eloquent for what it is as "Inner City Blues," "A Funky Space Reincarnation" almost as groove-alicious as "Got to Give It Up."

When reissue producer Harry Weinger calls *Here, My Dear* an "overlooked masterpiece," he's not bullshitting—this is Gaye's most playable album. Even the bonus disc's new remixes have some jam; they help to prove that Marvin Gaye was the rare overextended romantic wreck who could make something of his failures. Somewhere out there is a divorce lawyer who did the world a solid.

Download "A Funky Space Reincarnation," "Anna's Song," "Here, My Dear"

Marvin Gaye, right after being told how much he owes in alimony.



THE SCORE

★★★★★

CLASSIC

★★★★

GREAT

★★★

GOOD

★★

MEDIOCRE

★

FOUL

BECK

ODELAY ★★★★★

GEFFEN/UMF

Thirteen sugar-coated pop-rocks that signified "the future" in 1996

Back during the first Tarantino administration (when multi-referencing white boys were running shit), this album turned a one-hit busker with a boom box into a visionary of 21st-century pop. Against grunge's death knells, Beck's sunny mosaic of sound and style seemed to augur a radically expansive new form (the term *sampledelia* had great abs back then). Now we know enough to hear rap-folk bricolages like "Devils Haircut" and "The New Pollution" as, simply, Beckmusic, rendered breakbeat-Technicolor by hip-hop aesthetes the Dust Brothers. This reissue's second CD offers a dizzying remix by Aphex Twin, a lovely "Jackass" *en español*, some soft Delta blues and several eye-glazing noise-jams—music a decade removed from the professional oddball we know today. Yet, even now, one need only utter the phrase "Cadillac pants" and a lovely vista swims in the mist: the shimmering utopia of one strange, brilliant kid from L.A.

CHRIS MORRIS

Download "Devils Haircut," "The New Pollution," "Where It's At"

BOOTSZY'S RUBBER BAND

STRETCHIN' OUT IN BOOTSZY'S RUBBER BAND ★★★★★

THIS BOOT IS MADE FOR FONK-N ★★½

BOOTSZY

ULTRA WAVE ★★★★★

WILLIAM "BOOTSZY" COLLINS

THE ONE GIVETH, THE COUNT TAKETH AWAY ★★★★★

COLLECTORS' CHOICE

Casper, Bootzilla and all their pals return to discographic life at last

With four albums under their own name and another pair under two of the leader's many solo sobriquets, Bootsy's Rubber Band was the star spin-off of George Clinton's ever-permuting



Surveillance footage of the jaywalking bust nearly destroyed Beck's career.

Parliament-Funkadelic brand. The concept was cartoon music for teens, with Bootsy Collins's bass more limber than lubricious, Bernie Worrell's synth squiggling whipped cream everywhere and voices high, higher and highest—the original chipmunk funk, only squirrely. These reissues do bypass the band's two already-available gold albums, but—what the hell—even Bootsy's best records are too sonically uniform to satisfy like a first-rate P-Funk CD. The 1976 debut *Stretchin'* tops this competition more with wandering ballads than with deep pulse. *Fonk-N* is long on stale jokes and automatic grooves that run out before the six-minute mark. *Ultra Wave* declares independence with its billing and its light, lighthearted beats. *The One*

Giveth provides shorter track lengths and pop-crafted songs to match. And then there's the one to buy: the *Back in the Day* best-of—still in print, and it don't stop.

ROBERT CHRISTGAU

Download "I'd Rather Be With You," "Psychoticbumpschool," "Mug Push"

COMMON

THISISME THEN: THE BEST OF COMMON ★★★★★

RELATIVITY/LEGACY

Early, Gap-free days of an indie-hip-hop ideal

These days, rapper-actor-Gap pitchman Common is living the dream. But in the Paleolithic era known as the '90s, the former Common Sense was a struggling

MC from the no-man's land of Chicago, trying to walk that fine line between staying conscious and getting over. *Thisisme Then* doesn't live up to its subtitle, since almost all 15 songs come from his first three albums (plus, one soundtrack rarity)—there's no sign of breakthrough hits "The Light" or "Testify." The collection instead reveals a young man grappling with complex issues like abortion ("Retrospect for Life," a duet with Lauryn Hill) and faith ("G.O.D. (Gaining One's Definition)," featuring Cee-Lo) with fleet, sophisticated rhymes. It isn't all top-drawer material—"Heidi Hoe" was embarrassing even back then—but this compilation serves as a fine reminder of a time when ambition in hip-hop wasn't so uncommon.

ALAN LIGHT

Download "I Used to Love H.E.R.," "G.O.D. (Gaining One's Definition)"

VARIOUS ARTISTS

ATLANTIC SOUL (1959–1975)

★★★★★

RHINO HANDMADE

More lost treasures from the greatest record label ever

The vaults of Atlantic Records are apparently bottomless. The label that brought the rolling rhythms and fervent vocal crescendos of black gospel out of the church and onto the pop charts—and put out the greatest records by Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin—is already copiously anthologized. But this spectacular 60th anniversary box set digs out chestnuts that even collector-geeks have missed. Scattered among the 82 tracks are a few songs by marquee names (Franklin's sanctified remake of the '50s hit "My Song"), but the focus is on excavation: highlighting the greatness of mid-level stars (stormy country-soul balladeer James Carr) and recovering lost hits (C & the Shells' pop-soul gem "You Are the Circus"). The result is a swathe of musical and social history, stretching from doo-wop to funk, from civil rights to black power. Listen closely for more history buried in the grooves: On the early-Isley Brothers nugget "Have You Ever Been Disappointed," there's some tight rhythm-guitar-playing by a southpaw session man named Jimi Hendrix.

JODY ROSEN

Download LaVern Baker & Jimmy Ricks, "You're the Boss"; the Sweet Inspirations, "Crying in the Rain"; the Persuaders, "Thin Line Between Love and Hate"

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THE BEST REISSUES FROM THE PAST MONTHS



NICK DRAKE FRUIT TREE

FONTANA/UMF

Four dark, bewitching discs from the late folk alchemist, conveniently compiled for maximum depressive power.



THE LIBERTINES TIME FOR HEROES: THE BEST OF

ROUGH TRADE

Pete Doherty was the prodigiously gifted frontman for these London punks. Then he formed a crack-smoking ring with his cat.

R.E.M.

With beautiful songs about confusion, politics and Andy Kaufman, they perfected the model of an indie-rock band *By JON DOLAN*

EVERY ORIGINAL ALBUM REVIEWED

SINGER MICHAEL STIPE was the shy art-school guy. Guitarist Peter Buck was the rock-history encyclopedia. Bassist Mike Mills had the awesomely nerdy eyewear and a perfect voice for harmonies. Unibrowed drummer Bill Berry thumped the tubs like they owed him rent money. This brainy bar band from Athens, Georgia, named after the physical state of dreaming, blazed out of the '80s underground to become the biggest, most respected American rockers of the early '90s and have remained an institution in fine standing ever since.

On five albums for I.R.S. Records, Stipe mumbled and Buck jangled, and they became what Buck aptly called "the acceptable edge of the unacceptable stuff." In 1987, they finally got on the radio with "The One I Love," then signed to Warner Bros. and supersized their sound without scrimping on smarts or nuance, as Stipe turned into a reserved version of Bono.

In 1995, Berry suffered a brain aneurysm and later retired from the band. Subsequent albums have been more reclusive, ivory-tower versions of their abstract early work. It often seems Stipe would rather play big brother to Conor Oberst and champion liberal causes than front a rock band. But if recent R.E.M. albums lack the grandeur of their finest work, each one has a moment or two of left-field bliss.

R.E.M., 1995 (from left): Peter Buck, Michael Stipe, Bill Berry and Mike Mills.



ESSENTIAL

MURMUR

I.R.S., 1983

★★★★★



A mysterious debut single ("Radio Free Europe") and EP (*Chronic Town*) raised national expectations, then

Murmur set the world of rock geekdom on its ear. Buck's chiming, skeletal guitar and the lithe, driving rhythm section mesh with Stipe's vague mumblings about vague emotions to make disarmingly beautiful music that mixes '60s folk significance with '80s new-wave ambivalence. Within a semester, a thousand lil' R.E.M.s would bloom.

Download "Radio Free Europe," "Sitting Still," "Laughing"

AUTOMATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

WARNER BROS., 1992

★★★★★



No one does dreamlike as well as R.E.M., so no wonder one of their biggest CDs is also their dreami-

est. Here, they pair melancholic folk-rock apparitions with hopeful strings: "Everybody Hurts" longs for community; the piano ballad "Nightswimming" hungers for sex and safety; "Man on the Moon" looks back to simpler times without self pity or irony. It's the R.E.M. to keep under the pillow for your next dark night of the soul.

Download "Man on the Moon," "Try Not to Breathe," "Ignoreland"

MONSTER

WARNER BROS., 1994

★★★★★



Stipe shaves his head, Buck turns it up to 11 (which, for R.E.M., is more like 8.5) and they deliver excellent songs

about being famous in the age of alternative culture. It's their most forceful, heavy record: established superstars kicking it like a pissed-off garage band. As romantic metaphors go, the call-return anthem "Star 69" hasn't aged well. But *Monster* is music of a moment—'90s alt-rock perfected.

Download "Crush With Eyeliner," "Bang and Blame," "Let Me In"

GREAT

RECKONING

I.R.S., 1984

★★★★★



Murmur was a modest success (charting at No. 36), but the band wasn't sure the ghostly production represented their full-bodied

live sound. *Reckoning* aims for the gut with roundhouse drumming, sunburst guitars, Podunk country ballads, clearly enunciated lyrics and just enough poetic vagueness to keep monkish obsessives scratching their heads. It's their weird take on Americana, ending, fittingly, with a song about being lost in America.

Download "So. Central Rain," "Pretty Persuasion"

DOCUMENT

I.R.S., 1987

★★★★★



On album five, R.E.M. went platinum for the first time, thanks to radio hits "The One I Love," one of the meanest mash-notes ever

penned, and "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)," the rare song to reference rock-critic legend Lester Bangs and get used in a Will Smith movie. Brilliant irony: R.E.M. cover '70s punks Wire and make fun of yuppies—yuppies who wouldn't know Wire from Whitesnake love the album.

Download "The One I Love," "Strange"

OUT OF TIME

WARNER BROS., 1991

★★★★★



In the early '90s, it didn't seem weird to base a video (for "Losing My Religion") on a story by magical-realist author Gabriel

García Márquez or to lead off an album with a bow shot at pop radio, featuring conscious-rap titan KRS-One. This strange, gorgeous record is as ecstatic as it is thorny. Is "Shiny Happy People" their kindest song or their most cynical? The nation's third-graders sure didn't care.

Download "Near Wild Heaven," "Losing My Religion"

CHECK IT OUT**FABLES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION**

I.R.S., 1985

★★★



A concept album about the Civil War would be so classic rock, so R.E.M. chose the more obscure (thus cooler) period after the end of slavery in which to set their concept album. But these languid, mossy songs are more about the idea of memory and place than any specific moment in time. Stipe ruminates on an ex-girlfriend, untended foliage, old trains, outdated maps and other images of stasis not at all exclusive to Dixie. **Download** "Driver 8," "Green Grow the Rushes"

LIFE'S RICH PAGEANT

I.R.S., 1986

★★★★



Buck called it their "Bryan Adams record." Maybe so, but John Mellen-camp producer Don Gehman helped craft the R.E.M. album with the most dust on its jean jacket. Stipe waxes metaphysical ("I Believe") and political ("The Flowers of Guatemala"); a banjo gets rocked; they turn global-warming complaints and a '60s-psychedelic nugget into hip hootenanny jams. On "Swan Swan H," Stipe even pretends he's a tired Civil War vet—or maybe a slave or a carpetbagger. It's hard to tell. **Download** "Fall on Me," "Superman"

NEW ADVENTURES IN HI-FI

WARNER BROS., 1996

★★★



During a 1995 show in Switzerland, at the height of their powers, Berry had a brain aneurysm. R.E.M. bounced back from that near-death experience with a reflective album of spacey and mellow guitars, warm, spare pianos and electronic ambience. Lyrics evoke loss, motion and escape. Yet despite references to beloved deceased heroes from Jesus to T. Rex singer Marc Bolan, this isn't about life slipping away—just midlife stocktaking. **Download** "New Test Leper," "Electrolife"

BE CAREFUL**GREEN**

WARNER BROS., 1988

★★★



The dinky dance song "Stand" made their first Warner Bros. album a hit, and geopolitical punditry like "Orange Crush" established Stipe as one of rock's premier smart guys. Sadly, it also features his corniest moment, "The Wrong Child," in which he condescendingly sings in the voice of a disabled kid, keening, "I'm not supposed to be like this!" **Download** "Get Up"

AND I FEEL FINE ... : I.R.S. YEARS 1982-1987

I.R.S./CAPITOL, 2006

★★★★



The songs on disc one are almost uniformly awesome, but the jumbled sequencing of their pre-fame years obscures the natural progression from big band on campus to superstars. The second disc is just-OK curios. **Download** "Sitting Still"

DEAD LETTER OFFICE

I.R.S., 1987

★★★



This stopgap of B-sides (including passable covers of Aerosmith and the Velvet Underground) shows that at the time, R.E.M. could sell anything to obsessed fans. It usefully adds 1982's transcendent *Chronicle Town* EP, where Buck's Southern-gothic strum is as eerie as the blasé gargoyle on the record jacket. **Download** "Wolves, Lower"

AROUND THE SUN

WARNER BROS., 2004

★★★



"Who died and lifted you up to perfection?" Stipe sings, lunging at George Bush on an election-year CD he promised would be their most political. Despite the sturdy songs and spy singing, the sentiments are only vaguely recriminating. Clarity just isn't R.E.M.'s best look. **Download** "Leaving New York"

FOR FANS ONLY**UP**

WARNER BROS., 1998

★★★



When Bill Berry quit the band to tend a Georgia farm, R.E.M. lost the guts of the group. Here they drift into electronica haziness on a record that made their '80s work sound overt. These intentionally slow, soft-focus ballads feel especially ungrounded: Lyrical transcriptions in the CD jacket (an R.E.M. first) won't help even the most avid Stipe Studies major to get a sense of what he means by, for instance, "I'll be pounce pony." **Download** "Daysleeper"

REVEAL

WARNER BROS., 2001

★★★



Fleshier and sunnier than *Up*, with the summery "Imitation of Life" providing their most beautiful moment in years, the first release of their second decade is a varied album of dappled love songs. They nod to soul music, '60s folk and the Beach Boys, but it feels less like a band working out the contours of a new sound than Stipe trying on different costumes. By this point, even many longtime fans had lost the plot. **Download** "Imitation of Life"

R.E.M. LIVE

WARNER BROS., 2007

★★★



The Internet is teeming with top-shelf R.E.M. concerts (Athens '83! Seattle '84!), so there's no need to buy this two-disc/one-DVD package, recorded in Dublin in 2005. After years of ornate studio experimentation that felt studied and lax, it's heartening to hear them rock as a unit. Sadly, there's some flabbiness, too—like being forced to watch your couch-jockey uncle try out the Bowflex he got for Christmas. A great drunken-crowd sing-along during "Man on the Moon," though, proves that even at their snooziest, they can still inspire reverie. **Download** "Man on the Moon"

FURTHER LISTENING**IN TIME: THE BEST OF R.E.M. 1988-2003**

WARNER BROS., 2003

★★★★

R.E.M. throw curve balls even on their greatest-hits records: This survey of their first seven Warner Bros. albums pointedly omits "Shiny Happy People" but includes "All the Right Friends," a song from their scrappy pre-*Murmur* days. The rest culls salient songs from hard-to-follow recent albums, covering up the band's drop-off in quality. **Download** "Bad Day," "At My Most Beautiful"

ATHENS, GA—INSIDE/OUT SOUNDTRACK

MCA, 1990

★★★★

This soundtrack to a documentary about the thriving Athens music scene features R.E.M. doing an acoustic version of the Everly Brothers' "All I Have to Do Is Dream," plus other local heroes including deadpan groove-band greats Pylon. The movie is a hoot, too: Buck is interviewed on his front porch, drinking a beer in his bathrobe. **Download** "All I Have to Do Is Dream"

FURTHER READING**MURMUR (33 1/3)**BY J. NIIMI
CONTINUUM, 2005

★★★★

R.E.M. have one of rock's more overeducated fan bases, but none of those brainiacs ever managed to pen their heroes a worthy biography. Niimi's intellectually ambitious pocket-book study mixes a detailed account of the album's recording with an incisive reading of Stipe's cryptic lyrics.

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Jimmy Page:
"Youch! My
rheumatism!"

I AM LED-GEND

Three decades after they called it quits, the awesomest rock band ever can still bring the thunder

LED ZEPPELIN

02 ARENA, LONDON

DECEMBER 10, 2007 ★★★★★

JASON BONHAM IS SO pumped, he may explode. Led Zeppelin have barely taken the stage and he's all over "Good Times Bad Times" like a rash. If he doesn't hold back, Led Zeppelin's religiously anticipated, two-and-a-half-hour reunion set will finish a half hour early.

Twenty-seven years ago, his drumming father, John, the band's imperious heart-beat, asphyxiated on his own vomit, ending the band's 12-year reign. But the elderly gentlemen accompanying Jason tonight have another ghost to lay to rest: the memory of two previous Zeppelin reunions—Live Aid in 1985 and an Atlantic Records anniversary hootenanny in '88—that loom large in the annals of rock-reunion suckiness.

Some baby boomers (Neil Young, for instance) were born to grow old. The ever-preening, all-shagging Led Zeppelin were

not. And though Robert Plant, in his 60th year, looks more golden retriever than golden god, they wear their ages well. John Paul Jones, 61, is slim and leathery. Jimmy Page, 63, in a long coat and sporting silver locks, is the wizard he once imagined himself.

After six weeks of rumored squabbling, they look relaxed. In their youth, Zep were a paradox: arrogant metal kings who gathered rock's serfdom in the shadow of their castle. As they reach pension age, there's a sense they've drained the moat a little; tickets were sold for low prices in an online lottery. Yet, even looser and less remote, sailing under a flag of goodwill (the show is a tribute to late Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun), the pressure remains intense. A prayer hovers above the 22,000 assembled in this spaceship-like arena: *Please, God, let them not be crud.*

At the start, omens are poor: "Good Times Bad Times," "Ramble On" and "Black Dog" are mushy and overexcited. But Zep hit a stride within a few glowering bars of the saturnine "In My Time of Dying," and

a crushing version of "For Your Life," from 1976's *Presence*, serves as a remit for an unloved record, while "Trampled Underfoot," steeped in Jones's quacking funk keys, is a reminder of their alchemy of influences.

And just when you're wondering what happened to the guys who made rock Satan-y and dangerous, there's the blues massacre "Dazed and Confused" in all its poisoned glory, with Page whipping out a violin bow to torture his Les Paul. After "Stairway to Heaven" (a collective gasp greets the sight of Page's double-necked guitar), Plant whoops, "Hey Ahmet, we did it!" And as the exotic odyssey "Kashmir" lifts to its ludicrous crescendo, you wonder how it is that four men, of any age, can make so much noise. Led Zeppelin have subsumed their planet-sized egos and lived up to their colossal rep.

As the final notes of the inevitable "Rock and Roll" fade away, the big screen flashes live footage of Plant's rear end. Ignorant (one presumes) of the camera's attention, he massages his buttocks lovingly. What the hell, he's earned it. *Tony Power*

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

Three young brothers upstage a pop-concert gala

Z100 JINGLE BALL

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, NEW YORK

DECEMBER 14, 2007

IT'S ABOUT FOUR hours into the Z100 Jingle Ball when Fall Out Boy lean into "This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race" and roughly 20,000 pre-to-postpubescent girls unleash a howl of consensual desire. FOB bassist Pete Wentz—wearing a ski-boot-sized cast on his broken left foot—responds with a quarter-salchow. But the furor isn't about Fall Out Boy. Jonas Brothers have been spotted off-stage, and they're on next.

The annual holiday concert thrown by New York's dominant Top 40 radio station is an all-stars-on-deck gala: the reigning *American Idol*, Jordin Sparks; Alicia Keys, who has this week's No. 1 hit; Timbaland, the production genius who has owned the charts for two years. And the crowd greets each luminary by catching up on their text messages. Genuine, ear-rattling excitement arises only for brief video teasers projected between acts, showing the Jonases—the

shaggy-haired, sunken-chested lords of Radio Disney—romping on their tour bus.

Otherwise, the crowd mostly seems unimpressed. Sparks's catchy single "Tattoo" inspires a sing-along. Avril Lavigne (resplendent in spangled skate-rat pants and matching hi-tops) whips things up with the cheer-punk thump of "Girlfriend" but loses the crowd with 2002's "Complicated," which in the shelf life of radio may as well be an oldie. Backstreet Boys' 15-minute set is ultra-smooth, but watching them croon "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)" and labor through decade-old choreography is almost unbearably poignant. Nobody in the building knows better than Backstreet how psyched Jonas Brothers are—or hates them more.

Comic relief arrives in the hulking form of Timbaland, who launches into a mesmerizing monologue, introducing his 5-year-old son ("Daddy loves you. And you love Daddy"), unleashing Yogi Berra-worthy aphorisms ("It's been a great year for me these last two years") and, finally, pandering ("I want to work with the Jonas Brothers"). He also brings on his protégés OneRepublic,

declaring, "I always wanted my own Fray." Such small dreams for such a big man.

Finally it's time for the main attraction. Nick, Joe and Kevin Jonas (ages 15, 18 and 20) arrive amid geysers of sparks, wearing '70s shag haircuts and wielding mildly catchy choruses of similar vintage. Their merely serviceable performance does display a whiff of novelty: Previous teen pinups offered a safely sexy take on contemporary sounds, but Jonas Brothers are the first ones to fetishize pop's past.

So how did they end up headlining a bill crammed with hitmakers? They did it the Disney way. As the record industry continues to crumble, the future may look like the Jonases: cute, multi-platformed and backed by the promotional muscle of The Mouse. They've been the opening act on the Hannah Montana tour, and where she, the Chee-tah Girls and *High School Musical* all broke first on TV, the Jonases are huge even without the tube. That will soon change. "Be sure to check out our new TV show," Joe Jonas says to the night's biggest cheers. "It's coming next year on the Disney Channel!" *Jody Rosen*

Jonas Brothers:
"Can anyone
buy us beer after
the show?"



JONAS BROTHERS: AMY WHITEHOUSE

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In the hood:
Paranoid Park star
Gabe Nevins.

HALF-PIPE DREAMS

Director Gus Van Sant's atmospheric skate-park drama captures what it's like to be 16 and airborne *By DAVID FEAR*

GUS VAN SANT'S *Paranoid Park* (★★★½) is another of the director's gloriously elliptical mood pieces: Chronology gets shuffled like a card deck, and atmosphere takes precedence over narrative. The title comes from a Portland, Oregon, skate park, where a typically disaffected teen named Alex (Gabe Nevins) watches gutter punks and thugs show off their moves. One evening, a security guard who works near the hangout falls—or is pushed—into the path of an oncoming train. Soon it becomes clear that Alex may know something about the incident.

Though *Paranoid Park* doesn't have quite the gravity of Van Sant's abstract looks at Columbine (*Elephant*) and Kurt Cobain (*Last Days*), it's filled with the same deep-thought existentialism and long takes that, even before death starts creeping in, give weight to a 16-year-old's everyday life. Van Sant recruited his young cast via MySpace postings, and the amateur actors help lend an air of mumbly-to-maniac authenticity. Most of the film focuses on Alex writing down his thoughts in a journal, skating around town with his buddies and putting up with his obnoxious girlfriend.

The result is the world's artsy-fartsiest teen flick—and it mostly works. The best parts of *Paranoid Park* nail that sense of free-floating longing associated with being a teen; you won't find a more poetic distillation of the desire to be one of the cool kids than a sequence featuring skateboarders sailing in slow-motion. When the story line eventually kicks in and the film turns into yet another parable of lost innocence, the movie's impact lessens. But style does trump substance for once. What the film lacks in drive it makes up for with a woozy approximation of adolescence that feels all too real.

Elsewhere in American indie-dom, moviemakers seem to have tired (for now) of the *Pulp Fiction* ideal of stone-cold killers conversing about cheeseburgers. Into the void steps an Anglo-Irish filmmaker, the playwright Martin McDonagh, with his feature debut, *In Bruges* (★★★½). It follows two foulmouthed Irish hit men, played by Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell, who lay low in Belgium after a job, awaiting further instructions. Something went horribly wrong on the duo's last gig, so if you guessed that their new orders include one killing the

other, congratulations! But writer-director McDonagh makes the story fresh and fun—it's not often you see a stoned dwarf



THE EXCITED-O-METER

We haven't seen 'em yet ... and we're not even sure we want to



VERY EXCITED
JUMPER

HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN plays a guy who can teleport anywhere. We predict: the sci-fi hit of the season.

EXCITED-ISH
10,000 BC



Looks like it could be the next *300*-style blockbuster. But when was the last time you saw a good caveman movie?



NOT SO MUCH

HORTON HEARS A WHO!

JIM CARREY does another Dr. Seuss film. If you sat through his live-action Grinch movie, you'll understand why we're dreading this.



get karate-chopped—and also manages, somehow, to get a great performance out of the usually screen-smug Farrell. *In Bruges* ends with a predictable showdown between morally conflicted murderers, but McDonagh's mordant wit and effective use of his cast make up for any climactic cop-outs.

Besides, there are worse things than a film that loses steam during its last lap—like one that completely squanders its only ace in the hole. **Drillbit Taylor** (★½) casts Owen Wilson as a homeless guy who gets hired to protect three high school übernerds from the campus bully. It's bad enough that the movie comes across as a lame *Superbad* rip-off (hey, it's an aggressive fat kid bickering with a neurotic romantic, and they have a whiny runt sidekick!). But to expect Wilson's nice-guy charm to carry the bulk of the jokes, and then give him nothing to do but react to clichéd teens, is a serious waste of talent. If the filmmakers just needed a foil for potty-mouthed kids, why didn't they hire Pauly Shore?

It's not just the big-budget, written-by-committee Hollywood pictures that are guilty of wasting talent, either. Zak Penn's indie flick **The Grand** (★★) is a largely improvised mockumentary about a poker tournament, starring David Cross, Woody Harrelson and former *SNL* cast member Chris Parnell. Few topics are as ripe for parody as the professional poker circuit, so you'd think that letting a talented group of comedians skewer the ridiculous culture of card players would be a sure thing. But the movie never lets them cut loose; maybe there's a brilliant satire somewhere on the cutting-room floor, but it's sure not up there on the screen.

Lastly, let's have a moment of silence for Winona Ryder's career. Here is an actress who once had her pick of projects; now she's been reduced to doing movies like **Sex and Death 101** (★), a dark romantic comedy about a cad (Simon Baker) who gets a mysterious e-mail naming all the women he'll nail in the near future. Cue a montage of this shallow a-hole indulging in a nonstop fuck-athon that's supposed to pass for charming. Ryder plays a goth named Death Nell who kills misogynists; if only her character had gotten to writer-director Daniel Waters first, preventing him from ever penning this offensively sexist trash. Waters was the guy who wrote the brilliant black comedy *Heathers*, the film that made Ryder a big name way back in 1989, so maybe she was returning the favor. She hasn't demonstrated such poor judgment since she decided shoplifting at Saks Fifth Avenue might be a fun way to spend an afternoon.

BLENDER APPROVED

Missed them in the theater? Catch them on DVD



INTO THE WILD

Director Sean Penn's dotting tribute to a real-life nature boy.



THE DARJEELING LIMITED

Three brothers bond in India. Quirky but heartfelt.



LAST GOOD MOVIE YOU SAW?

JAMES BLUNT

"JUNO. The lead actress has huge potential. She seems so young, but she commanded that film. It's a very sweet movie with a dark sense of humor and a lot of sarcasm."

MUSIC DVDS

SCREEN SPIRIT

Kurt's tragicomic life, in his own words By RYAN DOMBAL

KURT COBAIN: ABOUT A SON

(SHOUT! FACTORY)

★★★★

WHILE SOME HOLLYWOOD hack toils away on the inevitable Kurt Cobain Oscar-bait biopic, director AJ Schnack comes through with a film that matches Cobain's contrary nature and emotional directness. *About a Son* is the story of Cobain as told by the man himself, through a series of recorded interviews with journalist Michael Azerrad conducted about a year before the Nirvana frontman's April 1994 suicide. Accompanying Cobain's commentary—sometimes funny (he tells of including used condoms in packages Nirvana sent to potential record labels), often tragic (repeated mentions of drug abuse and suicide)—are moody shots of the Washington State towns where he spent most of his 27 years. *About a Son* succeeds by eschewing typical blowhard mythmaking in favor of an honest account of a flawed and fascinating human being.



Cobain (right): "Wheeee!"

THE BEST OF THE REST

DISPATCH ZIMBABWE—LIVE AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN (BOMBER RECORDS)

Unsigned Boston jam band Dispatch shocked many when they sold out three charity reunion shows at the country's most famous arena last summer. Less surprising is the staleness of the group's reggae-lite tunes: These brahms make Dave Matthews sound dangerous.

INSIDE THE SMITHS (TIB STREET FILMS)

Based on the reminiscences of bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce, this cheap, hour-long doc is aimed squarely at the *Meat Is Murder*-button-wearing crowd. "I didn't really want to go into the world of Morrissey," admits Joyce of his time in the Smiths. It's a telling summation of the DVD, which is heavy on nostalgia and light on insight.

HIP HOP TIME CAPSULE: THE BEST OF RETV—1994 (MVD VISUAL)

A bountiful year for hip-hop, 1994 saw debuts from Nas and Biggie and the rise of Snoop Dogg. This slapped-together tribute features banal interviews and a slew of videos readily available on YouTube. But the vintage live footage of Method Man and L.A. rappers the Pharcyde redeems the disc slightly.



MOTOR CITY MADNESS

Live out your fast-and-furious fantasies with this urban-racing game (By LIBE GOAD)

BURNOUT PARADISE

EA; XBOX 360, PS3

★★★★½

MAXIMUM
OVERDRIVE!

Set in the fictional metropolis of Paradise City—where the grass is green, but there are no girls, pretty or otherwise—*Burnout Paradise* is the fifth game in EA's hit automotive-action franchise. While popular racing series like *Gran Turismo* and *Ridge Racer* specialize in reproducing souped-up vehicles in stunning detail and running them on beautiful but soulless tracks, the *Burnout* games have always been built around living, breathing cities, where every intersection offers plenty of choices—left, right or straight into a wall.

Burnout Paradise breaks new ground for the series: Instead of unlocking sections of the city piece by piece, as in previous installments, the entire urban landscape is available from the start. But *Paradise*'s open-ended nature can also work against it, forcing drivers to seek out the action rather than having it thrust upon them. Not that getting into a race is very difficult—just pull up to a stoplight, rev your engine to challenge another motorist and put the pedal to the metal.

The real fun happens online, where up to eight drivers can race through the streets or compete to catch the most air in *Dukes of Hazzard*-worthy stunts. And if you and your racing opponents set up your consoles' Web cams, you can enjoy the game's most memorable feature: Force someone else's car to crash, and the cam snaps an agony-of-defeat "mug shot" of the unlucky victim for your viewing pleasure.



NFL TOUR

EA SPORTS; XBOX 360, PS3

★★★½

Not everyone wants to read through *Madden NFL*'s 60-page instruction manual just to play some football. For the short-attention-span set, there's *NFL Tour*, which requires basic button-mashing skills to throw, catch and pull off some cartoonish acrobatics in the course of games that last 15 minutes each. Unfortunately, the rap-and-rock soundtrack can't drown out ESPN talking head Trey Wingo's too-quirky commentary.

FRONTLINES: FUEL OF WAR

THQ; XBOX 360, PS3, PC

★★★★½

Think gas prices are bad now? Imagine a near future in which the world has split into two warring factions, fighting over the few barrels of crude left in the Middle East. *Frontlines* pits the Western Coalition (us) against the Red Star Alliance (them) in a first-person shooter that successfully combines the intense desert firefights of *Call of Duty 4* with the wide-open environments of the *Battlefield* series.

DEVIL MAY CRY 4

CAPCOM; XBOX 360, PS3, PC

★★★½

This anime hack-and-slasher stars two demon-killing heroes who take their style cues from the Harajuku set. Players use a combo of swords, guns and a "devil bringer"—a special weapon that latches onto targets and pulls them in closer—to off hell-spawned beasts. The game's graphics are amazing (particularly the incredibly detailed architecture), but its repetitive action sequences turn slaying demons into a chore.

DARK SECTOR

D3; XBOX 360, PS3, PC

★★★

While on a mission, black-ops CIA agent Hayden Tenno gets infected with a top-secret virus and comes down with a nasty case of mutant arm, meaning his right hand has become a metallic bio-weapon that can shoot spinning boomerang-style blades. (Sure beats Montezuma's revenge.) Taking the emphasis off guns—enemy weapons have DNA scanners that prevent unauthorized use, so you can't fire most of them—gives this otherwise standard third-person action game a fresh spin.

BLENDER (ISSN 1534-0554) Volume 7, Number 2, is published monthly with a combined issue in January/February by Dennis Publishing Inc., 1040 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10018. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send change of address to BLENDER, P.O. Box 420234, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0234. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON, L4B 4R6. One-year subscription rates: For U.S. \$15.94, for Canada \$25.94, for all other countries \$35.94 in prepaid U.S. funds. We sometimes make our subscriber list available to companies that sell goods and services by mail that we believe would interest our readers. If you would rather not receive such mailings, please send us a note with your current mailing label or address to: Blender Customer Service, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Printed in the U.S.A.

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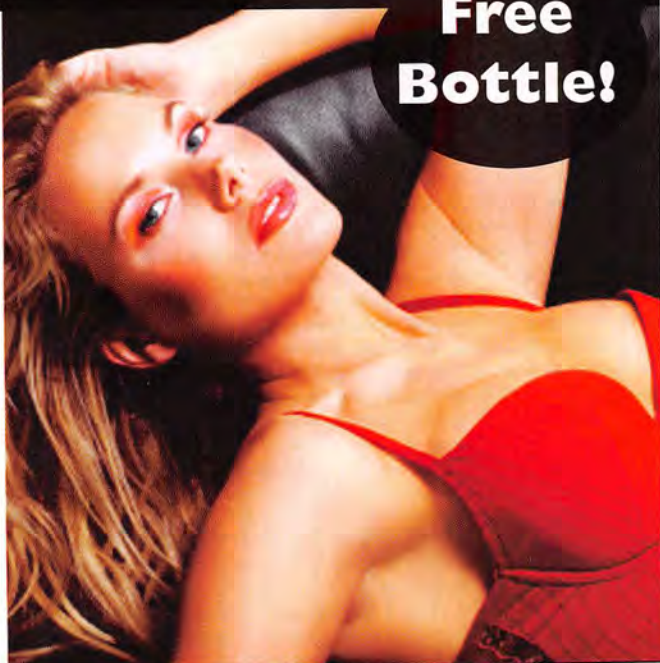
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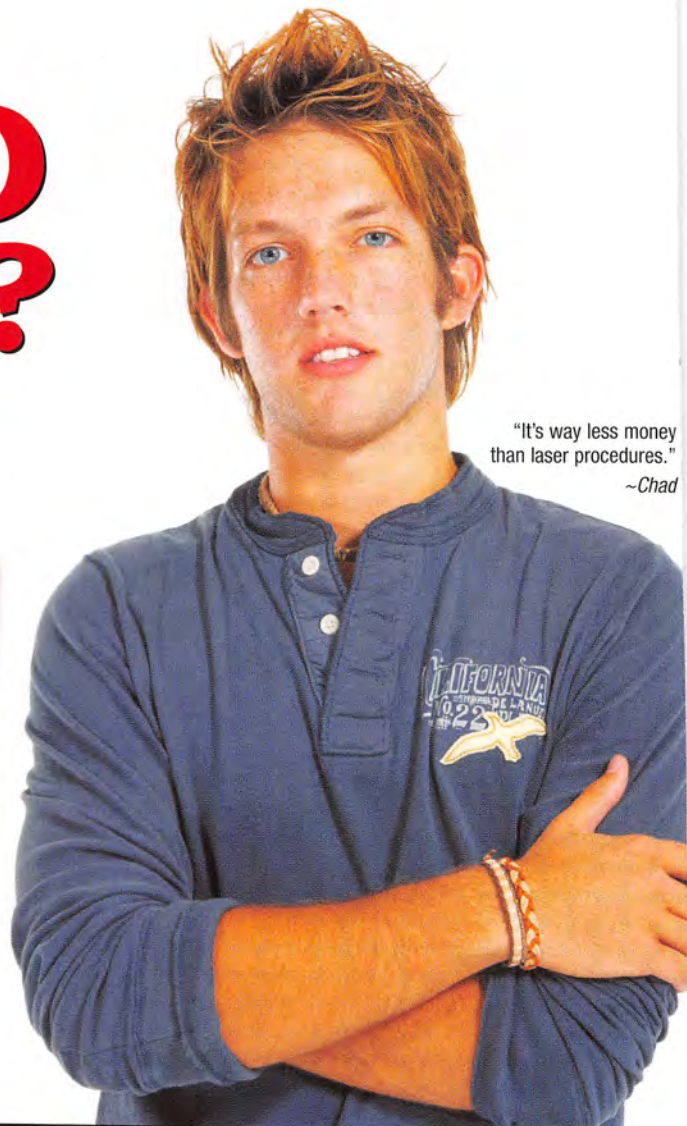


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WHO DOES LENNY KRAVITZ THINK HE IS?

By ROB TANNENBAUM Photograph by CHRIS BUCK

Why did you draw yourself wearing a LET LOVE RULE T-shirt? That was the title of your first album, back in 1989. It's still the most important idea, you know? It's very simple, but as a global community right now, we're on a wavelength that likes greed and power and ego.

So, it's Friday night at 11 P.M. ... It is?

No, right now it's Monday, a little after 6. Oh.

But on a typical Friday at 11, what are you doing?

It's early, so I'm probably at the studio in Times Square. I come out about 2 or 3 A.M. and go down the street to this joint called GoldBar, have a few tequilas, unwind the

brain. By the time I'm getting into bed, the sun's starting to come up.

If we drug tested you, what would we find?

Nothing. Some red wine and tequila, but that's it.

C'mon, Lenny. It's no secret that you ...

Used to smoke a lot of weed. I'd smoke an ounce in two days. I was high from age 11 until I was 35.

What changed?

One day in Australia, I woke up and didn't want it anymore. God just said, *I'm pulling you out of this.* I didn't touch alcohol—that's why I was a pothead. I drank Manischewitz wine at a Hanukkah party on Staten Island when I was 7 and threw up all over the house. I was in bed for a week. Then when I started to tour,

I learned about Château Lafitte and Cheval Blanc. I was like, "Oh, wine can be good!"

What do you spend too much money on?

Real estate. I have five houses right now: Paris, Brazil, Miami, New Orleans, New York. Oh, and Bahamas—six.

What's the worst job you've ever had?

I worked at a fish market in L.A., gutting and frying fish. I stank for about eight months. But I was living out of my car, and my grandmother taught me, *Work where you can get some food.* That was some old-school black survival advice.

What ethnic stereotype do you live up to?

I'm Jewish and black, so both.

Woody Allen one minute, Richard Pryor the next.

Ever model yourself on someone else?

Prince—when I was in high school. I straightened my hair, and I wore the look he had back in 1980: black tuxedo coat, white shirt with the button ruffles. But not the panties.

How would you characterize your taste in sex?

Passionate. Deep. To me it's a spiritual thing. When girls would find their way into my hotel room and offer sex, I couldn't do it.

How many people have you truly loved?

Lots. Maybe a hundred. If I love you, I'll always love you. Doesn't mean I'm gonna be around you, but I can't discard it. Love is eternal for me. [BLUESY]



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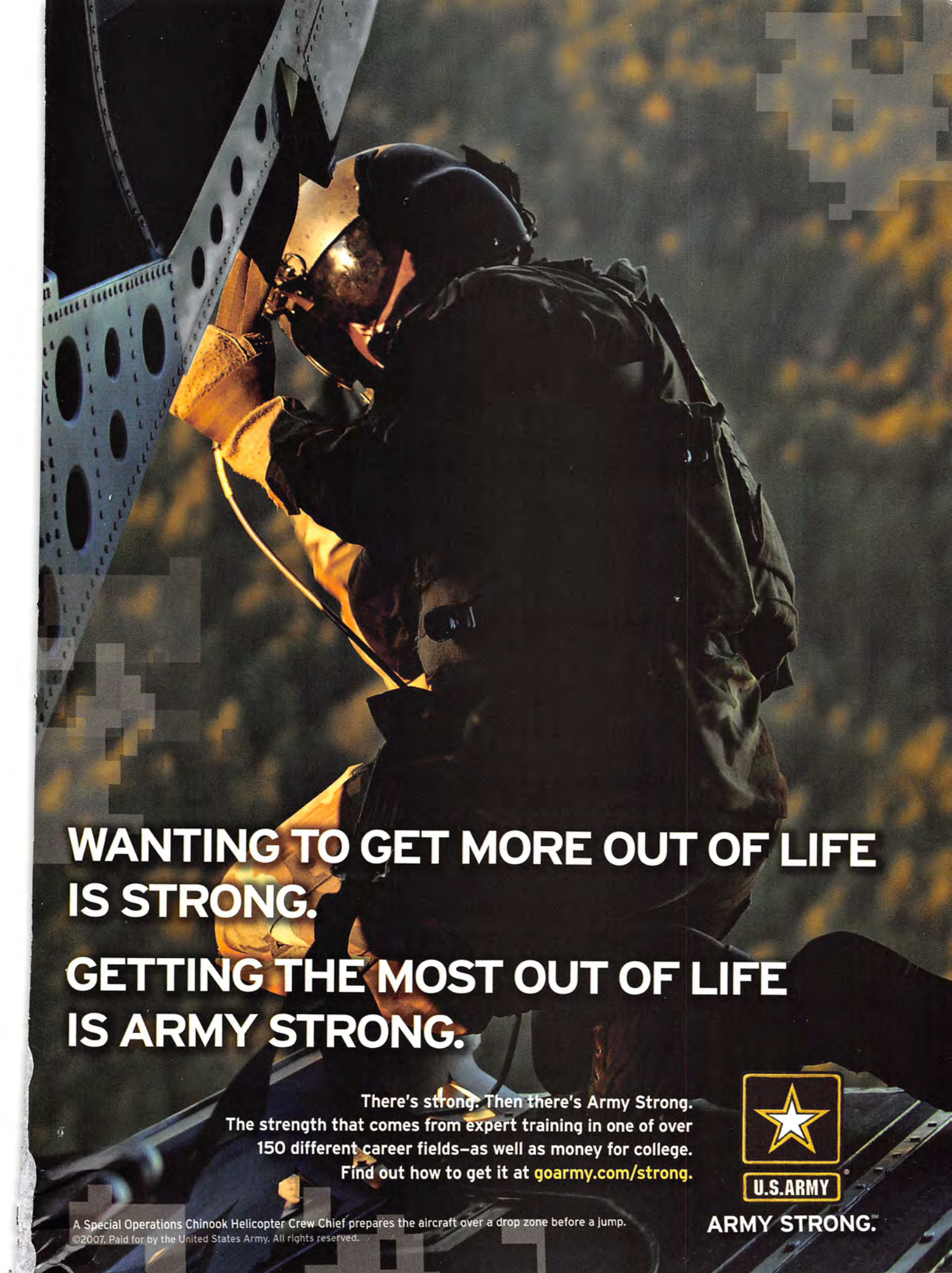
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